

SEC PREVIEW

SPECIAL ISSUE

Sports Illustrated

PRESENTS

'09

SCOUTING REPORTS

On All 12 SEC Teams

SI's ALL-SEC TEAM

Tebow, Scott, Hardy, Berry....

The BEST CONFERENCE

In College Football

BY AUSTIN MURPHY

OLE MISS ON THE MARCH

HOUSTON NUTT'S
Rebels Are
For Real

Why the BEST RECRUITS

Sign with the SEC

Inside the Game's
FIERCEST
RIVALRIES



LSU TIGERS'
CHARLES SCOTT
Bringing Back
The Rear

Ole Miss

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Sports Illustrated

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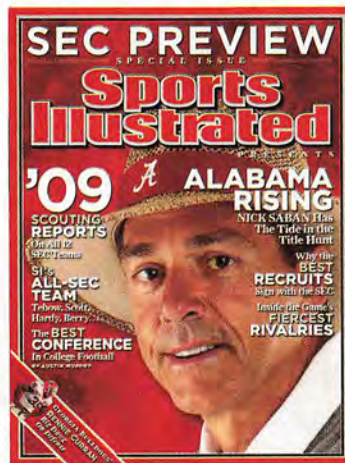
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SI's 2009 SEC football preview has regional covers that feature four coaches and seven teams. To order cover reprints, go to SICovers.com

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WESTERN

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS
AUBURN UNIVERSITY
LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI
MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY

EASTERN

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA
UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

SEC2009

Sports Illustrated
P R E S E N T S

Three national championships in a row (and

IT'S AN

four of the last six) . . . fierce rivalries inside

SEC WORLD

and across state lines . . . the most passionate

(AND EVERYONE

fans this side of the Atlantic . . . traditions that

ELSE IS JUST

can melt a sportswriter's hardened heart . . .

LIVING IN IT)

BY AUSTIN MURPHY

I'VE RIDDEN THE FERRIS WHEEL AND PARTAKEN OF THE DEEP-FRIED, INFARCTION-INDUCING foodstuffs at the Texas State Fair in the hours before the annual brawl between Texas and Oklahoma. I've lit a candle on game day in the Grotto at Notre Dame and "jumped around" after three quarters at Wisconsin's Camp Randall Stadium. ¶ I've made multiple pilgrimages to Ann Arbor and Corvallis, Columbus and Coral Gables. I've been to USC so many times I know what it says at the base of the statue of Tommy Trojan. (*Palman qui meruit ferat—*

Latin for "Let him who deserves it bear away the palm.") I've debriefed such partisans as James Bishop, an Oregon alum who interrupted our interview in November 2008 to dance on the Beaver at midfield at Reser Stadium, his Ducks having just knocked Oregon State out of the Rose Bowl.

I've chatted with fans from the Pac-10 and Big Ten and Big East and ACC who believe their school's rivalries and traditions are unsurpassed.

Their ignorance is excusable. One cannot appreciate the lunacy, the urgency, the antipathy (to say nothing of the Wild Turkey) permeating and surrounding SEC football games by

nalina That Dare Not Speak Its Name) gave us, appropriately, Celebrationgate: the premeditated storming of the end zone by jubilant Bulldogs after Georgia's first touchdown. That Mark Richt-inspired mind game (along with 188 yards and three touchdowns from Knowshon Moreno) led to a 42-30 Dawgs victory—Georgia's third win in this series in 18 years—and quickly became a bigger story in these parts than the hundred-year drought afflicting the Peach State.

Yes, things get boisterous at the ST'DNSIN, just as it's raucous on Rocky Top and deafening in Death Valley and damnably difficult for opposing quarterbacks to audible in The Swamp.



There's nothing subtle about SEC Saturdays, from 'Bama's bolsterous boosters to Spurrier's pass-happy offense to Georgia's over-the-top

merely watching Verne Lundquist and Gary Danielson call them on CBS—engaging and incisive though those gentlemen may be. But I have crisscrossed the republic delving into such matters, and I am here to tell you that the Southeastern Conference is home to the most passionate sports fans this side of those Brits who live for soccer clubs like Arsenal and Liverpool and Manchester United.

You think Autzen Stadium rocks? Try communicating with your neighbor during a fourth-quarter LSU comeback at Tiger Stadium, where a Tommy Hodson to Eddie Fuller scoring pass with 1:47 left in the 1988 game against Auburn triggered a roar so ground-shaking that it registered as a mild earthquake on the university's seismograph.

Yeah, I know Michigan–Ohio State is a rancorous, spiteful rivalry. But if it were truly volatile, it would require a neutral site, much in the way Georgia and Florida settle their differences in neither Athens nor Gainesville, but in Jacksonville. That annual battle begat an annual bacchanalia so over-the-top that SEC commissioner Mike Slive had to plead with TV networks to stop referring to the game by its nickname, The World's Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party. In 2007 the ST'DNSIN (Satur-

And really, can a defeated opponent be made to feel any lower than when Alabama fans strike up the "Kammer Jammer Yellow Hammer" cheer?

But the most brutal home crowd I've ever heard was on a Saturday night at Auburn in '06. Egged on by 87,541 frenzied fans—and a rare halftime tantrum from then headman Tommy Tuberville—the Tigers upended undefeated, second-ranked Florida 27-17 without scoring an offensive touchdown. That result left zero undefeated teams in the SEC and gave fresh ammunition to those who argue that this conference, with its (almost) across-the-board speed and quality and depth, is unduly penalized by college football's lack of a playoff system.

On that night at Auburn, a grim-visaged Urban Meyer sought no refuge behind that excuse. "This is a tough-ass conference," he said. "That's part of the deal."

Florida fans had no way of knowing it that night, but the Gators were in the process of disproving the widely held belief that no SEC team could survive its conference schedule and go on to win a national title. Meyer & Co. did it in '06; LSU won it all a year later. And there was Florida last January—in the wake of college football's Year of Big 12 Offense—shutting

FROM LEFT: MARVIN GARDINUS/PRESSWIRE; SCOTT AUDETTE/REUTERS; PHIL GONCALVES/ROD ROSS/TO; DONALD MARLATT/REUTERS IMAGES

down Oklahoma and its Heisman-winning quarterback, Sam Bradford, in the BCS title game.

With this league going 3 for 3 in the last three national championship games, with 18 starters from Florida's '08 national championship team returning to the consensus preseason No. 1, with five teams from this conference in most preseason Top 20s, it's time for the rest of college football to face the music: It's the SEC's world, and everyone else is just living in it.

HOW HAS THIS COME ABOUT? IN A CONFERENCE BLESSED with superlatives—richest traditions; coolest venues; bitterest rivalries (*page 94*); and gnarliest, speediest, orneriest defenses—the offenses have finally caught up. It started with Steve Spurrier, who brought his Fun 'n' Gun scheme to Gainesville in 1990 and revolutionized the way SEC teams move the ball. In what had been a staid, conservative coldbed of offensive innovation, almost half the teams now employ some variant of the spread offense.



touchdown celebration in Jacksonville to Auburn's furious assault on Florida, but that kind of intensity wins games—and national championships.

That evolution goes hand in glove with coaching upgrades. What was known for decades as primarily an athletes' conference is now a showcase, arguably, for the top coaching minds in the college game. LSU's Les Miles led the Tigers to the '07 national title; Meyer's Gators will be fighting for their third in four years this season. Down in Oxford, Arkansas castoff and turnaround specialist Houston Nutt coached Ole Miss to nine wins and a Cotton Bowl victory over ballyhooed Texas Tech. And it would seem to be just a matter of time before offensive wizard Bobby Petrino returns the Razorbacks to the Top 25—provided he is not overcome by wanderlust. Again. Another SEC coach with a national title on his résumé is South Carolina's Spurrier, who guided the Gators to the promised land 13 seasons ago. His Gamecocks squads have been entertaining but erratic—such as the '07 team that rose to No. 6 in the rankings before losing 17–6 to Vanderbilt. And how about the Commodores, who roared to a 5–0 start in '08, then finished the season by knocking off Boston College in the Music City Bowl? One of the best coaches in this conference works in Nashville. Nice job, Bobby Johnson.

It is in their messy leave-taking, of course, that we are

reminded of the downside of all this passion, the true cost of the arms race, the pathologies beneath the pageantry. No conference does soap opera like the SEC. Take the recent example of Tuberville, who was run out of Auburn four seasons after leading the Tigers to a 13–0 record. Yes, his team slipped to 5–7 last season—mainly because Coach Tub hired an offensive coordinator he was forced to fire one month into the season. He admitted his mistake and tried to move on. But AD Jay Jacobs decided that Tuberville's .680 winning percentage, his 9–5 record in his last 14 games against Top 10 teams and his 7–3 record against Alabama were insufficient. In a state in which the unemployment rate hit 9.8% in May, Auburn is paying Tuberville more than \$5 million not to coach this season.

"It's been a great place to coach and live," said Tuberville, gracious to the end. "And we've had a lot of success along the way."

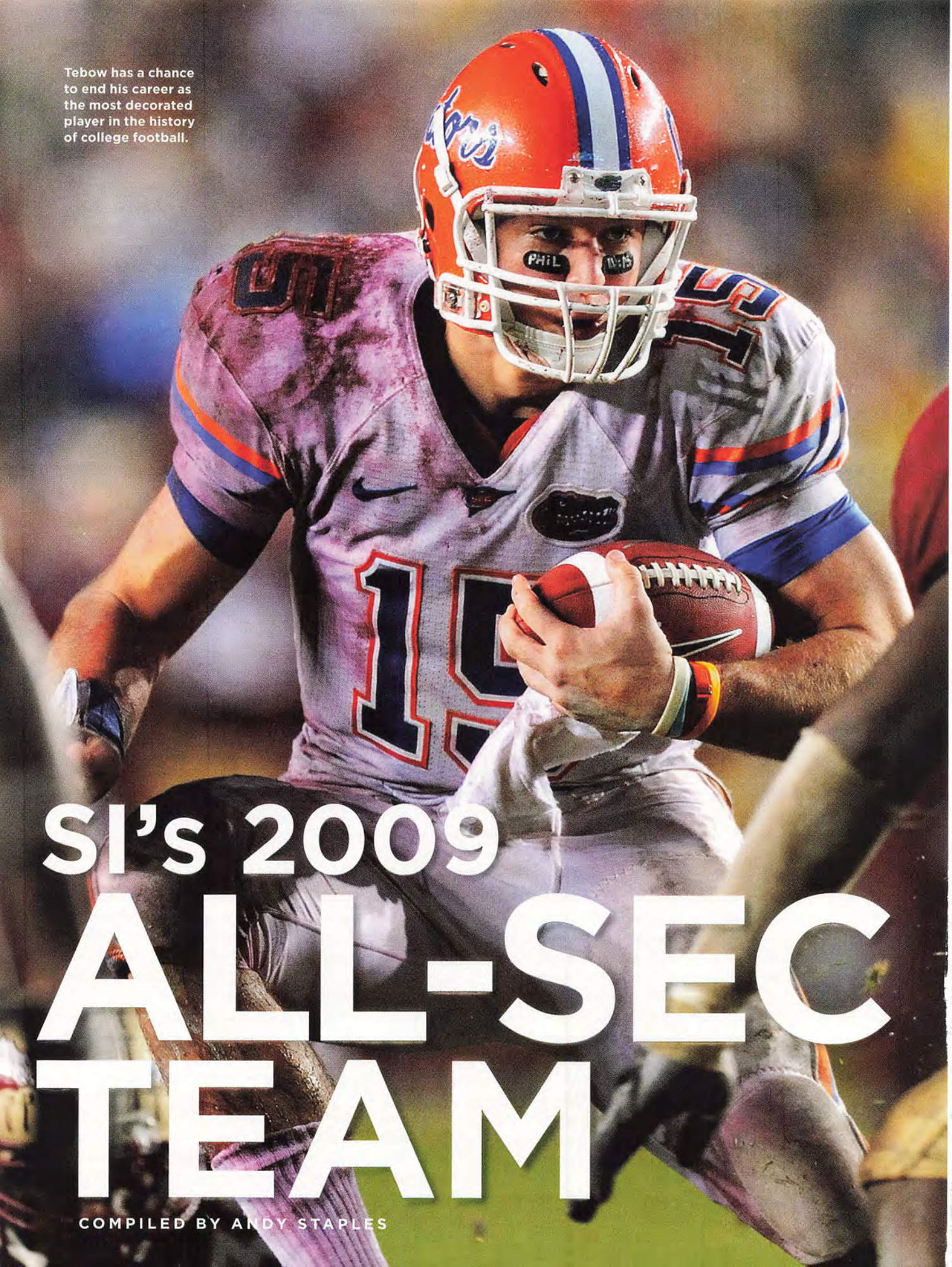
One of his biggest wins was that night in '06, when the Tigers dealt Florida its only loss of the season. I remember that game for the way Auburn defensive end Quentin Groves made

Chris Leak miserable. I remember how a guy named Jerraud Powers blocked a Florida punt and Tre Smith recovered the ball, then somersaulted into the end zone for the game-winning touchdown.

But mostly I remember it for what I witnessed a half mile from the stadium two hours after the final whistle. I'd been hearing about it for most of my life but had never seen Toomer's Corner after an Auburn football victory. And there it was, that joyous (for Tigers) tableau: white filaments of Charmin and Scott hanging like some exotic species of Spanish moss from every limb of the oaks lording over Toomer's Drug Store.

So familiar is this particular tradition that it's almost entered the realm of such overexposed props as the azaleas at the Masters and the mint juleps at the Kentucky Derby. You hear about the rolling of Toomer's Corner, and maybe your eyes glaze over a little.

But there was nothing stale about experiencing it firsthand. Rather, I found it beautiful and a tad surreal, navigating this two-ply microclimate, returning the smiles of perfect strangers, understanding, finally, that just because some traditions may be ancient doesn't mean they ever get old. □



Tebow has a chance to end his career as the most decorated player in the history of college football.

SI's 2009 ALL-SEC TEAM

COMPILED BY ANDY STAPLES



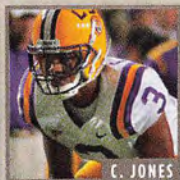
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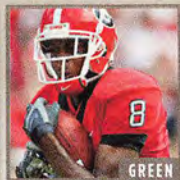
ARENAS



MCNEIL



C. JONES



GREEN

OFFENSE

QB | TIM TEBOW SENIOR, FLORIDA Aiming for a third national title and a second Heisman Trophy

SECOND TEAM: **JEVAN SNEAD** JUNIOR, MISSISSIPPI

RB | CHARLES SCOTT SENIOR, LSU Bullish back last season rushed for 1,174 yards, fifth in LSU history

SECOND TEAM: **MARK INGRAM** SOPHOMORE, ALABAMA

RB | MICHAEL SMITH SENIOR, ARKANSAS Averaged 141.4 all-purpose yards per game in 2008

SECOND TEAM: **ANTHONY DIXON** SENIOR, MISSISSIPPI STATE

WR | JULIO JONES SOPHOMORE, ALABAMA Big (6' 4", 210), strong receiver is the total package

SECOND TEAM: **BRANDON LAFELL** SENIOR, LSU

TE | AARON HERNANDEZ JUNIOR, FLORIDA Mobile pass catcher could be Tebow's go-to guy

SECOND TEAM: **D.J. WILLIAMS** JUNIOR, ARKANSAS

OT | CIRON BLACK SENIOR, LSU Mammoth tackle (6' 5", 325) anchors improved offense

SECOND TEAM: **CLINT BOLING** JUNIOR, GEORGIA

OG | MIKE JOHNSON SENIOR, ALABAMA Three-year starter will lead revamped line

SECOND TEAM: **LYLE HITT** SENIOR, LSU

C | JOSH MCNEIL SENIOR, TENNESSEE Has made 35 consecutive starts; helped '07 line allow just four sacks

SECOND TEAM: **MAURKICE POUNCEY** JUNIOR, FLORIDA

OG | MIKE POUNCEY JUNIOR, FLORIDA One half of twin tandem destined for NFL

SECOND TEAM: **MITCH PETRUS** SENIOR, ARKANSAS

OT | JOHN JERRY SENIOR, MISSISSIPPI Brother Peria is gone, but a Jerry will still dominate in Oxford

SECOND TEAM: **LEE ZIEMBA** JUNIOR, AUBURN

WR | A.J. GREEN SOPHOMORE, GEORGIA Led SEC in receiving yards (963) as a freshman

SECOND TEAM: **DEXTER MCCLUSTER** SENIOR, MISSISSIPPI

DEFENSE

DE | GREG HARDY SENIOR, MISSISSIPPI Speedy edge rusher averaged almost a sack a game as a junior

SECOND TEAM: **ANTONIO COLEMAN** SENIOR, AUBURN

DT | TERRENCE CODY SENIOR, ALABAMA Slimmed down noseguard (now a trim 354 pounds) impossible to move

SECOND TEAM: **DAN WILLIAMS** SENIOR, TENNESSEE

DT | GENO ATKINS SENIOR, GEORGIA Had 32 quarterback hurries and also saw some snaps at fullback in '08

SECOND TEAM: **MALCOLM SHEPPARD** SENIOR, ARKANSAS

DE | CARLOS DUNLAP JUNIOR, FLORIDA Last season's SEC sack leader (9½) was defensive MVP in BCS title game

SECOND TEAM: **JERMAINE CUNNINGHAM** SENIOR, FLORIDA

LB | ROLANDO MCCLAIN JUNIOR, ALABAMA Physical specimen (6' 4", 249) started even as a true freshman

SECOND TEAM: **PATRICK BENOIST** SENIOR, VANDERBILT

LB | BRANDON SPIKES SENIOR, FLORIDA The heart of championship defense returns after flirting with NFL

SECOND TEAM: **RENNIE CURRAN** JUNIOR, GEORGIA

LB | ERIC NORWOOD SENIOR, SOUTH CAROLINA Has been named All-SEC as an end and a linebacker

SECOND TEAM: **RICO MCCOY** SENIOR, TENNESSEE

CB | JOE HADEN JUNIOR, FLORIDA One of SEC's most versatile athletes has 4.3 speed

SECOND TEAM: **JAVIER ARENAS** SENIOR, ALABAMA

S | ERIC BERRY JUNIOR, TENNESSEE Unanimous All-America as a sophomore after picking off seven passes

SECOND TEAM: **AHMAD BLACK** JUNIOR, FLORIDA

S | CHAD JONES JUNIOR, LSU Two-sport star (baseball) should be even better after move to free safety

SECOND TEAM: **RESHAD JONES** JUNIOR, GEORGIA

CB | TREVARD LINDLEY SENIOR, KENTUCKY Holds school record for career pass breakups with 34

SECOND TEAM: **CHRIS HAWKINS** SENIOR, LSU

SPECIAL TEAMS

K | JOSHUA SHENE SENIOR, MISSISSIPPI SEC's active leader in field goals (42)

SECOND TEAM: **JONATHAN PHILLIPS** SENIOR, FLORIDA

P | CHAS HENRY JUNIOR, FLORIDA Semifinalist for the Ray Guy Award averaged 43.4 yards per boot

SECOND TEAM: **CLINTON DURST** JUNIOR, AUBURN

KR | JAVIER ARENAS SENIOR, ALABAMA Averaged 23.6 yards per kickoff return last season

SECOND TEAM: **BRANDON JAMES** SENIOR, FLORIDA

PR | BRANDON JAMES SENIOR, FLORIDA Always seems to tilt field position back in Gators' favor

SECOND TEAM: **TRINDON HOLLIDAY** SENIOR, LSU

Branpian Southernland
(36) scored one of
Georgia's two TDs
in a 26-14 win over
Tennessee last season.



SCOUTING REPORTS > THE SI VAULT > PLAYER PROFILES

SEC EAST

FLORIDA GATORS

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44 | Myron Lewis is a triple threat

STEVE MONTGOMERY/THESPINAR



FLORIDA

THE GATORS

KEYS FOR '09: QB TIM TEBOW > REPLACING HARVIN > STAYING HUNGRY

FOCUSED ON ANOTHER FANTASTIC FINISH

Thanks to grueling summer workouts, the '08 champs got even stronger—and that's bad news for the rest of the SEC | TEXT BY ANDY STAPLES

FLORIDA COACH URBAN MEYER HAD A DILEMMA, albeit a pleasant one: How to keep his national championship team, which has the 2007 Heisman winner and a total of 18 starters back, from resting on their laurels? The answer came easily. Meyer just ordered speed and strength coach Mickey Marotti to make the players' lives miserable from May until August.

"We're going to make it so hard that they're just going to try to make it to three o'clock in the afternoon," Meyer said after the Gators' spring game. "So hard that they're going to have a hard time picking up the *Street & Smith's* magazine that tells them how good they are."

If Marotti succeeds, the Gators might be even better than they were last season. Led by senior Tim Tebow, who has been working on his throwing motion with new quarterbacks coach Scot Loeffler to better prepare himself for the NFL, Florida certainly has the pieces. On defense middle linebacker Brandon Spikes will command a unit that allowed 12.9 points a game last season, fourth best in the nation.

If the rigorous workouts weren't enough, the sheer talent on Florida's roster provides another check against complacency. Sophomore cornerback Janoris Jenkins must play well or risk losing playing time to senior Windy Pierre-Louis, who started all 13 games at the position in '07. Even Spikes will find himself pushed by junior Brandon Hicks, junior Lorenzo Edwards and senior Dustin Doe.

Wideouts Riley Cooper and David Nelson, two stars of Florida's postseason wins against Alabama and Oklahoma, are back, but home run threats Percy Harvin and Louis Murphy are gone. Receivers coach Billy Gonzales hopes Deonte Thompson, Carl Moore or Frankie Hammond Jr. can help fill the void.

If he can stay healthy, running back Emmanuel Moody gives the Gators a bruiser up the middle to complement speedsters Jeff Demps and Chris Rainey.

If the Gators take a cue from their fiery QB, complacency shouldn't be a problem. "We'll be hungry because we have great senior leaders," he says. "That's the most important thing for keeping that edge."

Led by Spikes (bottom), Meyer's Florida defense allowed just 12.9 points per game in 2008.



2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Urban Meyer (5th year)
44-9 (24-8 in SEC)

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Steve Addazio

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Charlie Strong

2008 RECORD: 13-1
(7-1, 1st SEC East)

FINAL AP RANK: 1

RETURNING STARTERS:
Offense 7, Defense 11

WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS:
7, 9, 13, 9, 13

2008 RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)

RUSHING OFFENSE: 10 (1)

PASSING OFFENSE: 61 (5)

TOTAL OFFENSE: 15 (1)

RUSHING DEFENSE: 15 (4)

PASSING DEFENSE: 20 (6)

TOTAL DEFENSE: 9 (3)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER

5 CHARLESTON SOUTHERN

12 TROY

19 TENNESSEE

26 at KENTUCKY

OCTOBER

10 at LSU

17 ARKANSAS

24 at MISSISSIPPI STATE

31 vs. GEORGIA

NOVEMBER

7 VANDERBILT

14 at SOUTH CAROLINA

21 FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL

28 FLORIDA STATE

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

It's almost unfair that in a year in which almost all the key players from Florida's national title team return, the Gators get one of the easiest draws in the SEC. No Alabama. No Ole Miss. Florida's toughest conference game is an Oct. 31 matchup with Georgia.

REPORT

THE GATORS SEC EAST

2 MINUTE DRILL

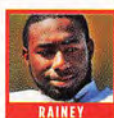
DEPTH CHART



DUNLAP



HADEN



RAINEY

OFFENSE

QB	TIM TEBOW*	JOHN BRANTLEY
RB	JEFF DEMPS*	CHRIS RAINEY
WR	RILEY COOPER*	DEONTE THOMPSON
WR	DAVID NELSON	CARL MOORE
TE	AARON HERNANDEZ*	DESMOND PARKS
OT	CARL JOHNSON*	MATT PATCHAN
OG	MIKE POUNCEY*	JAMES WILSON
C	MAURKICE POUNCEY*	SAM ROBEY
OG	MAURICE HURT	COREY HOBBS
OT	MARCUS GILBERT	DAVID YOUNG
WR	DEONTE THOMPSON	FRANKIE HAMMOND JR.

DEFENSE

DE	JERMAINE CUNNINGHAM*	DUKE LEMMENS
DT	TERRON SANDERS*	OMAR HUNTER
DT	LAWRENCE MARSH*	JAYE HOWARD
DE	CARLOS DUNLAP*	JUSTIN TRATTOU
LB	A.J. JONES*	BRANDON HICKS
LB	BRANDON SPIKES*	LORENZO EDWARDS
LB	RYAN STAMPER*	DUSTIN DOE
CB	JANORIS JENKINS*	WONDY PIERRE-LOUIS
SS	AHMAD BLACK*	DORIAN MUNROE
FS	MAJOR WRIGHT*	WILL HILL
CB	JOE HADEN*	MARKIHE ANDERSON

SPECIAL TEAMS

P	CHAS HENRY	DAVID LERNER
K	JONATHAN PHILLIPS	CALEB STURGIS
PR-KR	BRANDON JAMES	CHRIS RAINEY

*Returning starter

TELLING NUMBER

26

Interceptions made by the Gators' D in '08, 15 more than in '07 and tied for the most in the nation. The players who made all but one of those return for '09.

Five of Demps's seven rushing TDs in 2008 were for 36 yards or more, and three were for 40 or more.





FROM FAR LEFT: MARC SEROTA/GETTY IMAGES; STEVE MITCHELL/AP (2); MARC SEROTA/GETTY IMAGES; GARY BOGDAN; JERRY LOBRIGUASS

KEY RETURNEES

QB **TIM TEBOW** SENIOR

He's been a role player on a national title team (2006), the youngest Heisman Trophy winner ever (2007) and the starting quarterback on a national title team (2008). What else is there for the senior to do? Winning a third title is at the top of his list.

LB **BRANDON SPIKES** SENIOR

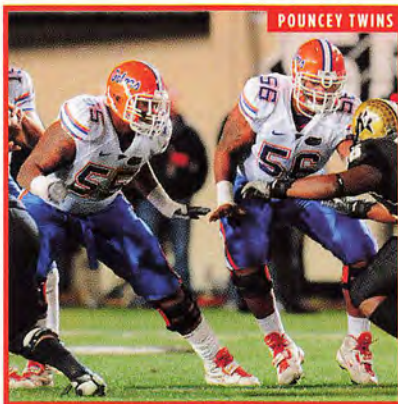
If Spikes has a few more hits like the one he laid on Knowshon Moreno—essentially ending the 2008 Florida-Georgia game in the first quarter—he may leave Gainesville as one of the SEC's alltime great defenders.

CB **JOE HADEN** JUNIOR

Haden became a starter almost by default as a freshman in 2007, but he grew into an elite corner as a sophomore. This season the junior should lead an experienced, lockdown secondary.

OLS **THE PONCEY TWINS** JUNIORS

Along with protecting Tebow, who was sacked just 15 times in '08, identical twins Maurkice and Mike helped the Gators rack up four of Florida's eight highest rushing totals in conference play during the Meyer era.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

RB **JEFF DEMPS** SOPHOMORE

Demps had 15 receptions for 141 yards and one TD

AN ELITE SPRINTER WHO ONCE RAN A 10.25-second 100-meter dash, Demps proved as a freshman that he's far more than just a track guy. The more physical member of a scatback tandem with fellow sophomore Chris Rainey, Demps gained 605 yards and averaged 7.8 yards a carry last season. Now that playmaker Percy Harvin has gone pro, Demps will have to make some big plays—and he's ready.

TOP RECRUIT

WR **ANDRE DEBOSE**

His last minute TD catch clinched the Class 6A title

AFTER FLORIDA'S SPRING GAME, GATORS coach Urban Meyer restated his hope that Debose, from Seminole High in Sanford, Fla., can help make up some of the production that Harvin provided. No pressure. But if anyone is physically equipped to replace Harvin, it's the speedy Debose.

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

November 11, 1985



FUN FACTS ABOUT THE FLORIDA Gators now that they are 7-0-1 and (maybe) America's No. 1 college football team.

1) THEIR COACH, GALEN HALL, IS NOT actually bald. He just has his mohawk on inside out. This, coupled with a Michelin Man physique, makes him look a little like Fred Mertz. His wife (Elaine, not Ethel) calls him "gorgeous." Rival coaches call him a genius. You can call him undefeated. As a coach, he's 15-0-1 over two seasons.

2) THEIR STAR QUARTERBACK, SOPH-omore Kerwin Bell, drives a slick sports car, just like everybody else's star quarterback. Only difference is, Bell paid for his. You see, Bell wasn't recruited. He was a walk-on from outside Mayo, Fla.

Anyway, Nov. 2, 1985, the Gators traveled to Auburn's Jordan (say it JER-den) Hare Stadium, where they had won only twice since 1927, and came away with a nervy 14-10 victory. Florida's triumph was impressive enough to vault the Gators past Penn State, an unimpressive winner over Boston College, and into the No. 1 slot in SI's Top 20.

Talk about an intoxicating feeling. Here was Bell, who grew up on a tobacco and chicken farm where he tossed post patterns to his sister, Sonja, and dreamed of nothing more than someday earning a spot on the Florida traveling squad. Suddenly he was the winning quarterback at dread Auburn and the headpin of the No. 1 team (maybe) in the land. —Rick Reilly

SI VAULT

For free access to all Gators stories and photographs from the SI archives, go to SI.com/vault



THE LITTLE SAFETY THAT COULD

Undersized at 5' 9", Ahmad Black almost never made it onto the field for the Gators, but he has since proved to be indispensable in the secondary



ON A BRIGHT JANUARY MORNING, URBAN MEYER TICKED off a list of complaints about strong safety Ahmad Black. "Too small. Too slow. Can't jump high enough," the Florida coach said. ⁵ Meyer smiled as he spoke, because hours earlier Black's fourth-quarter interception of Oklahoma quarterback Sam Bradford had helped the Gators

win another national title. Based on his measurables, the 5' 9", 185-pound junior from Lakeland, Fla., has no business playing strong safety for an elite program. The Sooners no doubt feel differently. In the BCS championship game Black timed his strike perfectly and ripped the ball away from receiver Juaquin Iglesias with 10 minutes left. The interception preserved a three-point lead, and Florida's offense rolled for a touchdown to seal the win.

Black is no stranger to big plays at crucial moments. As a senior at Lakeland High in 2006, he helped stuff a St. Thomas Aquinas back at the goal line on fourth down in the second overtime of the Class 5A state title game. The play won Black's Dreadnaughts a state title, and Black assumed it would be the best play he would ever make at that stadium in Miami—until he swiped the ball from Iglesias.

What's remarkable is how close Black came to leaving Gainesville before he ever had a chance to shine. When he arrived at Florida in '07 as part of a recruiting class that included seven of his high school classmates, the coaches looked at his size and immediately assumed he'd be too small to play safety. So they moved Black to cornerback, a position he'd never played. It didn't take long to realize Black wasn't fast enough to play corner in the SEC. He was frustrated, and so was Meyer, who worried he'd made a recruiting mistake. The coach says he came close to telling Black he was better suited to play Division I-AA.

"We're going to be real good," says Black. "But we can't get complacent."

After three discouraging months at cornerback, coaches asked Black to move to safety before a practice the week of the Florida State game. "From then on I fit in," he says. "It felt good. It felt like a natural position for me."

By the time projected strong safety starter Dorian Munroe tore the ACL in his right knee in an off-season drill during the summer of '08, Black had finally earned the trust of Meyer and safeties coach Chuck Heater. They inserted

Black into the starting lineup, and Black repaid them by tying for the national lead in interceptions, with seven.

Black idolizes Bob Sanders, the 5' 8" safety who helped the Indianapolis Colts win Super Bowl XLI by intercepting a pass and forcing a fumble on football's grandest

stage. Black has a similar nose for the ball, and he believes his instincts help him make game-changing plays.

He will have to keep those instincts sharp to help a Gators D that ranked ninth among FBS schools in total defense in '08 and has all 11 starters returning. But first he must fend off a challenge from Munroe, who has recovered from his knee injury. That should help Black, who believes that all of Florida's defenders need motivation to keep from resting on their laurels. "We're going to be real good," he says, "better than we were last year. But we can't get complacent." And if Black needs more inspiration, he can think back to two years ago, when everyone thought he was too slow and too small to make a big impact. "Size," Black says, "isn't everything." □



Black (top and below) made seven interceptions for the Gators in '08, which tied for best in the nation. Two of those came in the season-opening win over Hawaii, which earned Black some love from QB Tim Tebow (above). The safety also had 59 tackles last season, which was fourth best on the team.





GEORGIA

THE BULLDOGS

KEYS FOR '09: NEW QB JOE COX > JEFF OWENS'S RIGHT KNEE > LSU AT HOME

HOT TIMES AHEAD IN ATHENS

A new quarterback and an improved defense may be enough to raise the Bulldogs to a championship level | TEXT BY LARS ANDERSON

THEY WANDERED THE SIDELINES IN street clothes like a pair of VIPs, chatting with reporters, posing for pictures with fans and shaking hands with players and coaches. What Matthew Stafford and Knowshon Moreno *weren't* doing at the G-Day game was playing, and that was the biggest news to come out of Athens this spring. Stafford and Moreno left school early to enter the NFL draft—on April 25 Stafford was the No. 1 pick, taken by the Lions, and Moreno was selected No. 12, by the Broncos—and took with them the expectations of winning a national championship.

But to hear the Bulldogs players tell it, that isn't necessarily a bad thing. "We got too caught up in the hype last year when we were ranked preseason Number 1," says junior linebacker Rennie Curran. "We weren't focused. We took things for granted. But now we love the fact that no one is paying attention to us. This year the bull's-eye isn't on us."

Unlike 2008, when Stafford and Moreno led the high-powered offense that carried the team, this season fifth-year senior Joe Cox (*page 20*) will run a grinding, ball-control offensive attack and be backed up by a defense that should be among the most improved in the SEC. In its three losses last season, Georgia surrendered an average of 45 points. But the unit will be vastly stronger up the middle in '09 because of the return of senior defensive tackle Jeff Owens, who missed all but one game last season with a knee injury. The biggest strength of the team, in fact, should be the interior line play of Owens and defensive tackle Geno Atkins, who had a team-high 32 quarterback hurries last season. "Getting Jeff Owens back is so important, because he's impossible to block one-on-one," says strong safety Reshad Jones. "Our D-linemen will take up blockers and free up our linebackers to make plays. This is why Rennie is going to have a huge year."

Last year the Butkus Award finalist had more tackles (115) than any Bulldog since 1998. Even at 5' 11", Curran can shed blockers as well as any SEC linebacker. "I'm trying to be the leader of our defense, to make everyone believe that we can win the SEC and the national championship," he says. "That's our plan."

Richt hopes Jones (9) will lead the Dawgs in interceptions for a second straight season.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: GARY BOGDON; TODD KIRKLAND/CON SM; MATT STAMER/US PRESSWIRE

2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Mark Richt (8th year)
82-22 (48-19 in SEC)
OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Mike Bobo
DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Willie Martinez
2008 RECORD: 10-3
(6-2, 2nd SEC East)
FINAL AP RANK: 13
RETURNING STARTERS:
Offense 7, Defense 6
WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS:
10, 10, 9, 11, 10
2008 RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)
RUSHING OFFENSE: 56 (5)
PASSING OFFENSE: 16 (1)
TOTAL OFFENSE: 22 (2)
RUSHING DEFENSE: 27 (6)
PASSING DEFENSE: 32 (8)
TOTAL DEFENSE: 22 (6)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER
5 at OKLAHOMA STATE
12 SOUTH CAROLINA
19 at ARKANSAS
26 ARIZONA STATE
OCTOBER
3 LSU
10 at TENNESSEE
17 at VANDERBILT
31 vs. FLORIDA
NOVEMBER
7 TENNESSEE TECH
14 AUBURN
21 KENTUCKY
28 at GEORGIA TECH

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

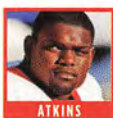
Georgia must travel to Stillwater, Okla., for its season opener. But if the Dawgs get steady play from Joe Cox, they should handle OSU and be undefeated when LSU comes to Athens. The most daunting challenge on the schedule: a matchup with the Gators on Halloween.

REPORT

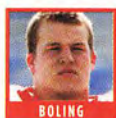
THE BULLDOGS SEC EAST

2 MINUTE DRILL

DEPTH CHART



ATKINS



BOLING



GREEN

OFFENSE

QB	JOE COX	AARON MURRAY
TB	CALEB KING	CARLTON THOMAS
FB	SHAUN CHAPAS*	FRED MUNZENMAIER
SE	KRIS DURHAM	TAVARRS KING
LT	CLINT BOLING*	CASEY NICKELS
LG	CORDY GLENN*	A.J. HARMON
C	BEN JONES*	DALLAS LEE
RG	TANNER STRICKLAND	BEN HARDEN
RT	JUSTIN ANDERSON*	JONATHAN OWENS
TE	ARON WHITE	BRYCE ROS
FL	A.J. GREEN*	MICHAEL MOORE

DEFENSE

DE	DEMARCUS DOBBS	KIANTE TRIPP
DT	JEFF OWENS*	KADE WESTON
DT	GENO ATKINS*	BRANDON WHEELING
DE	JUSTIN HOUSTON	JEREMY LONGO
LB	DARRYL GAMBLE	NICK WILLIAMS
LB	AKEEM DENT*	MARCUS WASHINGTON
LB	RENNIE CURRAN*	MARCUS DOWTIN
CB	PRINCE MILLER*	VANCE CUFF
SS	RESHAD JONES*	QUINTIN BANKS
FS	BRYAN EVANS	JOHN KNOX
CB	BRANDON BOYKIN	SANDERS COMMINGS

SPECIAL TEAMS

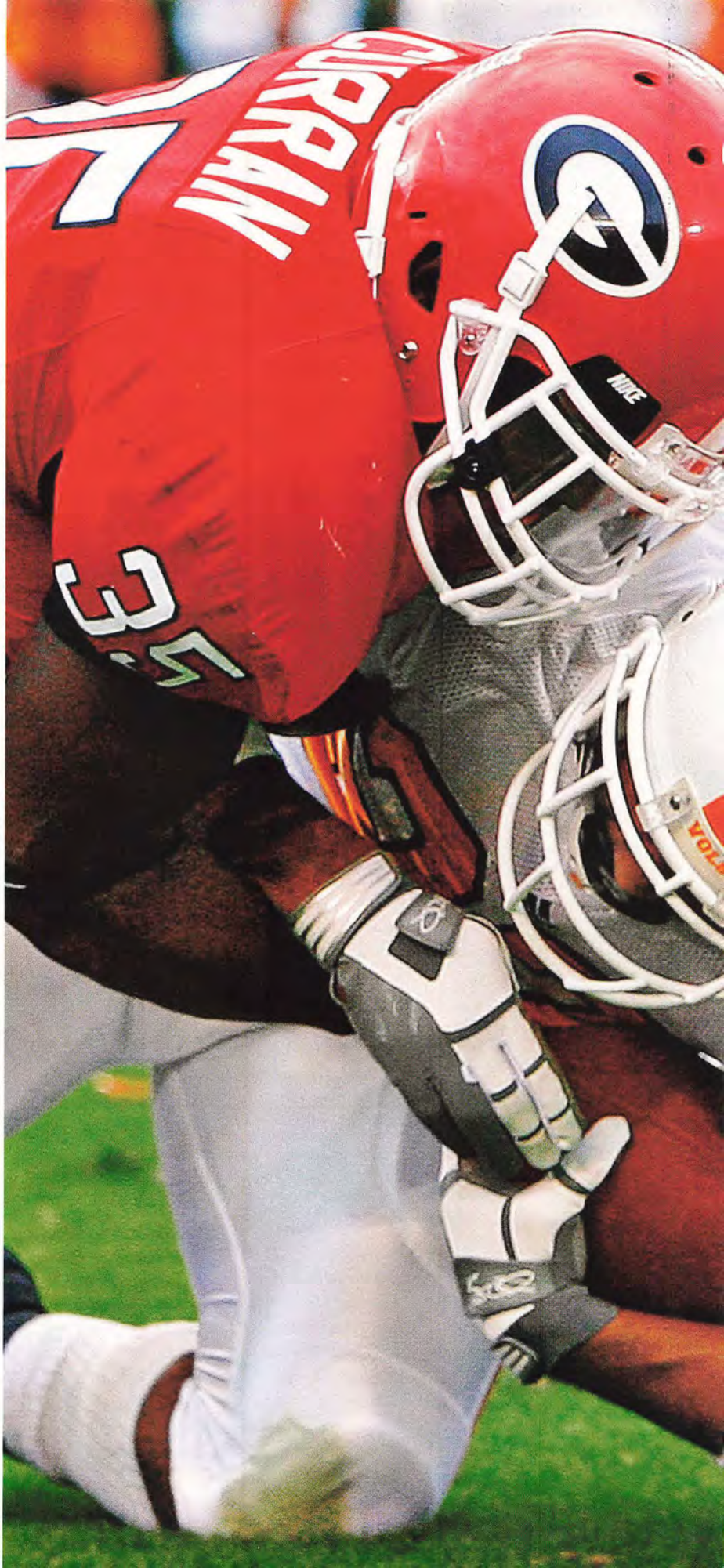
P	DREW BUTLER	TRENT DITTMER
K	BLAIR WALSH*	ANDREW JENSEN
PR	PRINCE MILLER*	KR BRANDON BOYKIN

*Returning starter

TELLING NUMBER

24

The number of freshmen who logged playing time for Georgia last year. The Bulldogs will be young this season but not inexperienced.



Curran delivered plenty of crushing hits in '08. The linebacker had double-digit tackles five times.

KEY RETURNEES

C BEN JONES SOPHOMORE

Though the offensive line was inconsistent last year, the 6' 3", 300-pound sophomore was a bright spot. Named to the freshman All-SEC team, Jones will be the line's anchor this season.

FL A.J. GREEN SOPHOMORE

Green led the SEC in receiving yards last season with 963, but he expects even bigger things in '09. The sophomore is now 100% healthy after being bothered by a groin injury for most of last year.

DT JEFF OWENS SENIOR

Owens received a medical redshirt after suffering a torn ACL in his right knee in the 2008 season opener against Georgia Southern. The redshirt senior has 56 quarterback hurries in three seasons in Athens.

WLB RENNIE CURRAN JUNIOR

Undersized at 5' 11" and 220 pounds, the junior is the defense's top playmaker. A Butkus Award finalist last season, he led the team in tackles (115), tackles for loss (10) and had a team-high three sacks.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

TB CALEB KING SOPHOMORE

Rushed for 247 yards on 61 carries; scored one TD

AFTER HE FAILED TO PICK UP A BLITZING linebacker against Florida on Nov. 1 and QB Matthew Stafford got sacked, King was demoted to third string. But the sophomore will have to shoulder a heavy load in '09. "I had some ups and downs last year, but I learned a lot," says King, who is a breakaway threat every time he touches the ball. "I feel like it's my time to step up." Georgia is counting on that.

TOP RECRUIT

QB AARON MURRAY

Threw for 1,927 yards and 33 TDs as a high school senior

ONE OF THE MOST HIGHLY TOUTED QUARTERBACK recruits in the country, Murray arrived at school a semester early to participate in spring practice. He won't win the job from Joe Cox this season, but the strong-armed Murray, who passed for 84 touchdowns in his last two years at Plant High in Tampa Bay, already has the inside track on being the starter in 2010.

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

December 23, 2002



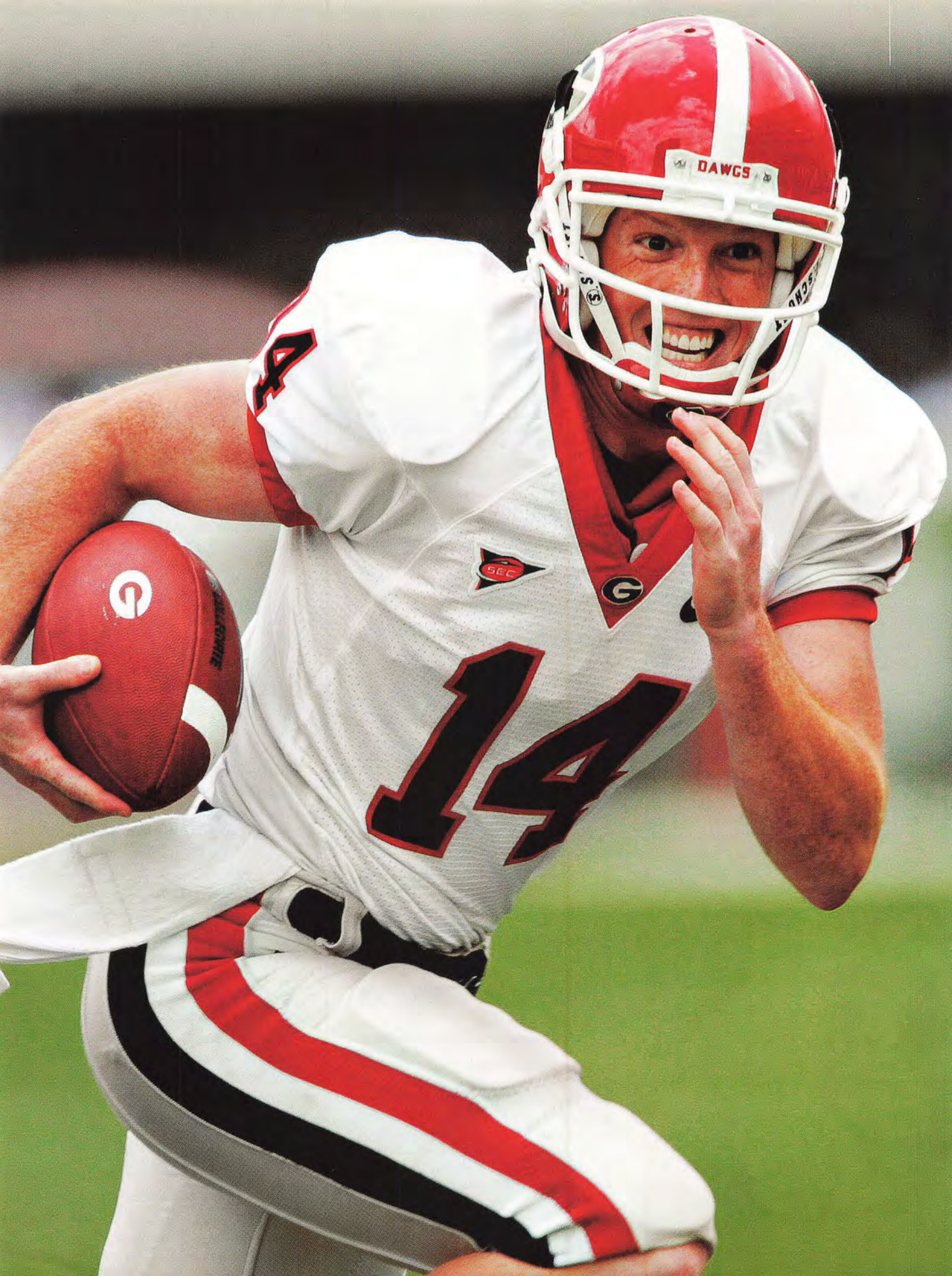
IF FOOTBALL IS GEORGIA'S STATE religion, the Bulldogs are the main denomination. On fall Saturdays, when the Athens air is scented thick with barbecue smoke, nearly 90,000 parishioners converge on Sanford Stadium. At The Varsity—a chain of throwback drive-ins where \$3.05 will get you a burger and a Coke float—some patrons have been known to forgo mustard lest the color be mistaken for fealty to Georgia Tech. "Georgia football is ingrained as a way of life," says Buck Belue, an Atlanta sports-talk radio host who, by dint of quarterbacking the Bulldogs' 1980 national championship team, is an A-level celebrity. "You live it, and you don't think twice about it. It's a part of who you are."

For two decades this devotion had gone largely unrequited. But in 2002 the Bulldogs went undefeated through their first eight games, and by the time Georgia faced Florida on Nov. 2 in Jacksonville, fervor for the team had reached fever pitch. Fans headed down I-95 with rubber Gators tied to their rear bumpers, and so much of the state was decked out in red-and-black that it resembled nothing so much as a 59,441-square-mile checkerboard. Georgia lost 20-13, but the Bulldogs regrouped to win their remaining three regular-season games and demolished Arkansas 30-3 in the SEC championship game. "We won [the SEC title] for every Georgia player in the last 20 years," says senior receiver Terrence Edwards [above]. "This was a long time coming."

—L. Jon Wertheim

SI VAULT

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THE WAITING GAME IS OVER

Quarterback Joe Cox has been an understudy for nearly his whole football career. Now he can't wait to prove his talent on the field

JOE COX IS AN EXPERT IN THE ART OF WAITING. AT INDEPENDENCE HIGH in Charlotte he waited and watched for two years as a quarterback named Chris Leak led the school to a second and third straight state championship before getting his chance to start. At Georgia the waiting game has ticked on . . . and on and on . . . for Cox. He has sat on the bench for the

better part of four years behind quarterbacks D.J. Shockley and Matthew Stafford, but now, finally, Cox is the Bulldogs' No. 1 quarterback.

So has the wait been worth it? "Absolutely," says Cox, a redshirt senior. "I've learned a lot from watching guys like D.J. and Matt. I feel like I'm ready to take charge."

If there was one overriding story line of spring ball at Georgia, it was this: The Bulldogs will go as far in 2009 as Cox will carry them. While he doesn't possess the arm strength of Stafford, Cox is a deadly accurate short- to intermediate-range passer, and he can make plays with his feet, which was something Stafford rarely did. Georgia coach Mark Richt believes that Cox will excel at "game management"—meaning he won't throw many interceptions (Stafford tossed five in Georgia's three losses last year), and he won't make mental mistakes that result in negative offensive plays, such as missing an audible or a protection call.

"Joe Cox has already proven himself to everyone inside of this program," says Richt. "There's not a player or coach on this team that doesn't have confidence in him and what he can do on the field. He gives us a peace of mind."

One thing is certain: Cox is a winner. He hasn't lost a game as a starting quarterback since the eighth grade. Once he took over for Leak at Independence High, he led the team to a 31-0 record and back-to-back state titles. In high school Cox threw for a state-record 66 touchdowns and twice was named MVP of the state title game. He

earned dozens of scholarship offers but settled on Georgia after he fell in love with the campus. "I knew nothing would be handed to me once I got here," Cox says. "It's been a little frustrating at times, but now I've got a chance to make the most of my one year as the starter."

Thus far Cox's most memorable moment at Georgia occurred in '06, when he replaced a struggling Stafford against Colorado. With the team trailing 13-0 when he entered the game

late in the third quarter, Cox completed 10 of 13 passes for 154 yards and two touchdowns to guide the Bulldogs to a 14-13 win. "Everyone who has been around here knows what Joe is capable of," says junior linebacker Rennie Curran. "We honestly don't think there's going to be a drop-off

in performance at the quarterback position."

If he needs extra motivation, Cox will be pushed by true freshman Aaron Murray, who was impressive in spring practice.

Cox is a close friend of Shockley's, another quarterback who had to wait four years for his chance to start at Georgia. Shockley wound up leading the Bulldogs to the SEC championship in '05. Now a backup for the Atlanta Falcons, Shockley frequently talks to Cox over the phone, counseling him on what it takes to succeed after spending so much time on the bench.

"D.J. has been preparing me for this season for a long time," Cox says. "I saw him come in and be successful after waiting for his chance, and now I'm trying to do the same thing. I can't wait for the season to get started." □



Though he has completed just 33 passes and thrown five TDs at Georgia while backing up Stafford (7, bottom), Cox gained confidence during the G-Day game on April 11 (left and above), in which he was 9 of 16 for 105 yards, including a 35-yard flea-flicker to receiver A.J. Green.





KENTUCKY

THE WILDCATS

KEYS FOR '09: QB PLAY > TOUCHES FOR COBB > REPLACING JARMON

REACHING FOR A BANNER SEASON

With Mike Hartline at quarterback and Randall Cobb at receiver, the Cats will try to recapture that Liberty Bowl magic | TEXT BY ELIZABETH MCGARR

IT MAY HAVE TAKEN FOUR MONTHS, BUT WHEN the dust had settled on Kentucky's 2008 season, capped by its thrilling, come-from-behind 25-19 victory over East Carolina in the Liberty Bowl, Wildcats quarterback Mike Hartline and his receivers were finally on the same proverbial page. "We all felt comfortable with each other," said receiver Kyrus Lanxter during spring practice. "The coaches started trusting us a little bit more and let us go out and make plays."

It hadn't always been that way. Due to injuries and a lack of depth, five true freshmen took the field at receiver for Kentucky in '08. And by November, when the offense wasn't producing as the Andre' Woodson-led '07 team had, the coaches made a switch: Hartline, a pocket passer, was out, and dual-threat true freshman Randall Cobb, who started the season at receiver, was in. "We weren't exactly a runaway train last year on offense," says quarterbacks coach Randy Sanders, who saw the SEC's top-ranked passing game in '07 fall to eighth in '08. With Cobb out of the Liberty Bowl because of knee surgery, Hartline completed 19 of 31 passes for 204 yards and a touchdown to earn offensive MVP honors.

Kentucky should have the best of both worlds in '09 with a more seasoned Hartline at the helm and Cobb back at wide receiver. "We'll do what we can to get the ball in [Cobb's] hands," Sanders says. The supporting cast includes junior tailback Derrick Locke, an All-America long jumper who spent the spring recovering from knee surgery, and speedy running back Alfonso Smith.

Defensively, Kentucky will rely on the experience of senior linebacker Micah Johnson (page 26) and corner Trevard Lindley but will have to find a replacement for star defensive end Jeremy Jarmon, who was deemed ineligible in May after testing positive for a banned substance.

Last year's Kentucky team made history by winning the program's third consecutive bowl game, but coach Rich Brooks has set his sights on improving the team's 2-6 conference record. The Wildcats have the potential to "climb that SEC ladder," as Brooks puts it. "People are just becoming more mature," says Hartline. "There's no more pointing fingers." And everyone's on the same page.

Assuming his surgically repaired knee is healed, Locke (20) will give Brooks a running threat.



2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Rich Brooks (7th year)
32-41 (13-35 in SEC)

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Joker Phillips

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Steve Brown

2008 RECORD: 7-6
(2-6, 6th SEC East)

FINAL AP RANK: NR

RETURNING STARTERS:
Offense 5, Defense 4

WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS:
2, 3, 8, 8, 7

2008 RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)

RUSHING OFFENSE: 82 (8)

PASSING OFFENSE: 96 (8)

TOTAL OFFENSE: 106 (9)

RUSHING DEFENSE: 55 (9)

PASSING DEFENSE: 40 (9)

TOTAL DEFENSE: 40 (11)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER

- 5 at MIAMI (OHIO)
- 19 LOUISVILLE
- 26 FLORIDA

OCTOBER

- 3 ALABAMA
- 10 at SOUTH CAROLINA
- 17 at AUBURN
- 24 LOUISIANA-MONROE
- 31 MISSISSIPPI STATE

NOVEMBER

- 7 EASTERN KENTUCKY
- 14 at VANDERBILT
- 21 at GEORGIA
- 28 TENNESSEE

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

The good news: The Florida and Alabama games are at home. The bad news: They come back-to-back early in the season. The slate eases a bit in October, though, which allows the Wildcats a chance to build some late-season momentum.

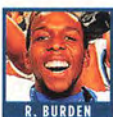
CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: BRAD SCHLOSS/ICON SM; KIM KLEMENT/US PRESSWIRE; ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES

REPORT

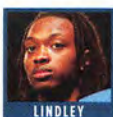
THE WILDCATS SEC EAST

2 MINUTE DRILL

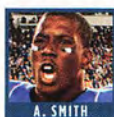
DEPTH CHART



R. BURDEN



LINDLEY



A. SMITH

OFFENSE

QB	MIKE HARTLINE*	WILL FIDLER
TB	ALFONSO SMITH	DERRICK LOCKE
WR	RANDALL COBB	E.J. FIELDS
WR	KYRUS LANXTER	ERIC ADEYEMI
TE	T.C. DRAKE*	MAURICE GRINTER
LT	ZIPP DUNCAN*	BILLY JOE MURPHY
LG	CHRISTIAN JOHNSON	MARCUS DAVIS
C	JORGE GONZALEZ*	MATT SMITH
RG	STUART HINES	JAKE LANEFSKI
RT	JUSTIN JEFFRIES*	BRAD DURHAM
WR	GENE MCCASKILL	MATT ROARK

DEFENSE

DE	COLLINS UKWU	GREG MEISNER
DT	COREY PETERS*	MARK CRAWFORD
DT	RICKY LUMPKIN	SHANE MCCORD
DE	CHANDLER BURDEN	TAYLOR WYNDHAM
LB	SAM MAXWELL	JACOB DUFRENE
LB	MICAH JOHNSON*	RONNIE SNEED
LB	DANNY TREVATHAN	WILLIAM JOHNSON
CB	TREVARD LINDLEY*	CARTIER RICE
SS	CALVIN HARRISON	ASHTON COBB*
FS	WINSTON GUY	MATT LENTZ
CB	RANDALL BURDEN	PAUL WARFORD

SPECIAL TEAMS

P	RYAN TYDLACKA	
K	LONES SEIBER*	RYAN TYDLACKA
PR-KR	RANDALL COBB	DERRICK LOCKE

*Returning starter

TELLING NUMBER

13

Sacks allowed by Kentucky in 2008, the fewest in the SEC. The Wildcats' average of one sack allowed per game tied for fourth best in the nation.



Hartline, who was benched midway through 2008, has the quarterback job all to himself this year.

KEY RETURNEES

CB TREVARD LINDLEY SENIOR
The All-SEC coaches' pick elected to return for his senior year, and it's a good thing: His 15 passes defended (11 pass breakups and four interceptions) led the league in '08.

QB MIKE HARTLINE JUNIOR
The offensive MVP of the '08 Liberty Bowl will have the reins in '09 now that Randall Cobb has made the full-time move to wide receiver. A more mature receiving corps should help him keep his starting job.

DT COREY PETERS SENIOR
With ends Myron Pryor and Jeremy Jarmon both gone, the coaches have high expectations for the 295-pound Peters, named the team's most-improved defensive player in 2007. Says coordinator Steve Brown, "I think he could be the best in the SEC at defensive tackle."

RB DERRICK LOCKE JUNIOR
When a left knee injury sidelined him in October, Locke was the team's leading rusher and kickoff returner. After months of rehab, the NCAA indoor long jump All-America expects to be "full-go" in August.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

WR RANDALL COBB SOPHOMORE
Sticking to one position should help Cobb blossom

HE STARTED FOUR GAMES AT QUARTERBACK in 2008, but coach Rich Brooks is confident that moving Cobb—who also caught 21 passes for 197 yards—to receiver full time in '09 is the right move. "I think that he's one of the big-time playmakers that we lost off of those '06 and '07 teams who can go out and win games for you," says Brooks, who thinks the coaching staff may have overburdened Cobb last year with the position change. "He's a remarkable talent."

KEY SIGNED

WR CHRIS MATTHEWS
Tall junior college wideout can find the end zone

THE TRANSFER FROM LOS ANGELES Harbor College should help the Wildcats immediately. Ranked as the second-best junior college wide receiver prospect by Rivals.com, the 6' 5" Matthews had 80 catches for 1,235 yards in nine games and scored 11 times, equaling the touchdown total for all of Kentucky's pass catchers in 2008.

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
October 12, 1964



THERE ARE NO FREAK EXPLANATIONS for the two biggest upsets of 1964, when Kentucky has suddenly learned to enjoy a sport other than basketball. On Sept. 26 Kentucky upset Ole Miss 27-21, and two weeks later the Wildcats upended Auburn 20-0. Both scores continue to look like typographical errors, but the simple explanation is that Kentucky has one of the best teams in the U.S.

For the Wildcats the heroes were half-back Rodger Bird, end Rick Kestner and quarterback Rick Norton, all juniors, all native-grown and all viciously disciplined by coach Charlie Bradshaw. On defense the same Wildcats were just as tough. Kestner, a linebacker, made repeated stops of the Auburn power sweeps. Bird and Norton helped contain Tucker Frederickson, who fumbled twice from the impact of Kentucky's swarming tacklers.

There are just three seniors on the squad, the last members of Bradshaw's "survival school" of 1962, a rugged pre-season period that saw half the team quit. Bradshaw's penchant for conditioning is so great that in '63, Kentucky got caught training when it shouldn't have been, and the NCAA imposed a probation that will prevent the Wildcats from playing in any postseason game. With most of its strong opponents already taken care of, Kentucky almost certainly would be a bowl candidate if it were eligible. For long-suffering Kentucky, however, winning seems to be its own reward.

—Larry Van Hoose

SI VAULT

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A WILDCAT WORTH THE WAIT

After two seasons spent resolving on-field and off-field issues, highly recruited linebacker Micah Johnson has started to live up to his hype

MICAH JOHNSON WAS READY TO PLAY COLLEGE BALL—three years ago. After all, in his two years at Fort Campbell (Ky.) High, about four hours southwest of Lexington, the four-star linebacker recruit had made 293 tackles (while adding 2,543 rushing yards and 46 touchdowns as a running back). He was going to be

the best middle linebacker the Kentucky Wildcats had ever seen. At least that's what he thought.

"In high school there was nothing to it," says Johnson, now a senior. "Just run and make a tackle. Or, 'Here's the ball, Micah. Run; do your thing with it.' In college it's so far from that."

Everyone from the media to the fans to the coaching staff had high hopes for Johnson, who after two seasons of false starts, is finally meeting those expectations. The 6' 2" 256-pounder is a sideline-to-sideline tackling terror who is the anchor of a defense that desperately needs one. The Wildcats have just four starters returning from a unit that last year ranked 11th in the SEC in total defense (332.4 yards per game).

In 2008 Johnson had a breakout season, leading the team in tackles for loss (13) and ranking second in tackles (93) despite missing 2½ games because of a high left ankle sprain. He was named All-SEC by the conference's coaches. "His biggest improvement is his nose for the ball," says linebackers coach Chuck Smith of Johnson, who went through the NFL's evaluation process before deciding to return for his senior season. "And his physical strength and his athleticism separate him from a lot of people."

Though Johnson had made it his goal to be a starter by the first game of his freshman season, he wound up starting just twice and making 29 tackles, only two more than he made against Greenbrier High during his senior year at Fort

Campbell. "I came into college benching over 400 pounds, squatting over 600 pounds and running a 4.6, so [my ability] was never an issue," he says. "I just had to digest our playbook, digest our scouting reports every week and watch a lot of film."

He had sports hernia surgery after his freshman season, but he put in the time in the film room, studied the playbook and soon things started to click. However, things weren't clicking

in the classroom for him—or for older brother Christian, who had just finished his sophomore season as the team's starting left guard. Seeing that the brothers were struggling academically, coach Rich Brooks suspended them beginning in March 2007. "My freshman

year I was feeling the pressure so much on the field and so much frustration. All I was thinking about was football. How can I get better on the field?"

Both were reinstated to the team before the '07 season, and Micah's production on the field and in the classroom slowly began to improve. He started only one game but had 58 tackles. "When he came back his sophomore year, you could just tell the pressure was off of him from the press, from the fans," says Smith. "It looked like the weight of the world was just lifted off of his shoulders."

After three years Johnson is ready to show that the weight has been lifted for good. "I just really took it to another level last year," he says. "I look to crank it up even more this year." □

"His biggest improvement is his nose for the ball," Smith says of Johnson.



Johnson had a breakout season in 2008, his first as a full-time starter. Though he missed a little more than two games because of an ankle injury, he ranked second in total tackles (93). After going through the NFL's evaluation process, Johnson returns to lead a Wildcats defense with many new faces.





TIME FOR AN EXTRA PUSH IN COLUMBIA

Steve Spurrier revamped his coaching staff this off-season to try to get the Gamecocks headed in the right direction | TEXT BY ELIZABETH MCGARR

THE NUMBERS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES, and Steve Spurrier knows it. For the last two seasons his South Carolina teams have been last in the SEC in rushing. And in 2008 the Gamecocks were also last in turnover margin (-11) and second to last in sacks allowed (39).

In an effort to turn things around, Spurrier overhauled his coaching staff in the off-season, bringing in six assistants (four on offense). He also relinquished the quarterback coaching duties to one of those new hires—G.A. Mangus—who played QB under Spurrier at Florida from 1990 to '91.

Mangus has his work cut out for him. On Jan. 9, the same day his hiring was announced, redshirt sophomore quarterback Chris Smelley, who started eight games in '08, announced he was transferring to Alabama to play baseball. A month later Tommy Beecher, who began '08 as the starter, was not asked to return to the team for a final season because of his poor performance and has since transferred to Liberty.

The only quarterback left on the roster with any game experience is redshirt sophomore Stephen Garcia, who missed two years' worth of spring practice, having had several run-ins with the law since arriving in Columbia as a four-star recruit in January '07. Garcia started three games last season, including South Carolina's 31-10 loss to Iowa in the Outback Bowl, a game in which he threw three interceptions and lost a fumble.

"He's got all the physical tools and all the skills," says Mangus, "but he needs a lot of training and a lot of work mentally and fundamentally over the summer."

Although the Gamecocks lost their top two receivers to the NFL, three starters return to an offensive line that has taken the weakness of the running game personally. "We're not going to be the weak link," says senior center Garrett Anderson.

On defense junior Chris Culliver and senior Darian Stewart return from a backfield that was No. 2 in the nation.

As for Spurrier, the 64-year-old coach calls this year's squad a "wait-and-see" team. What he'll see probably won't be very good.

Culliver (17) will be the stalwart in the secondary, and Spurrier will continue to call the plays on offense.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: PAUL ABELL/JUS PRESSWIRE; MATTHEW SHARPE/GETTY IMAGES; BOB ROSENTO

2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Steve Spurrier (5th year)
28-22 (15-17 in SEC)

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Steve Spurrier

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Lorenzo Ward

2008 RECORD: 7-6
(4-4, T-3 SEC East)

FINAL AP RANK: NR

RETURNING STARTERS:
Offense 4, Defense 6

WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS:
6, 7, 8, 6, 7

2008 RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)

RUSHING OFFENSE: 113 (12)

PASSING OFFENSE: 50 (3)

TOTAL OFFENSE: 97 (7)

RUSHING DEFENSE: 43 (7)

PASSING DEFENSE: 2 (1)

TOTAL DEFENSE: 13 (4)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER

- 3 at N.C. STATE
- 12 at GEORGIA
- 19 FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL
- 24 MISSISSIPPI

OCTOBER

- 3 SOUTH CAROLINA STATE
- 10 KENTUCKY
- 17 at ALABAMA
- 24 VANDERBILT
- 31 at TENNESSEE

NOVEMBER

- 7 at ARKANSAS
- 14 FLORIDA
- 28 CLEMSON

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

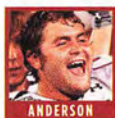
Nonconference losses to Iowa and Clemson hurt the Gamecocks in '08, but they should be 2-1 heading into the matchup with Ole Miss. The Spurrier-Gators showdown should be closer than last season's 56-6 rout, but Florida will make it four wins in a row for the coach's alma mater.

REPORT

THE GAMECOCKS SEC EAST

2 MINUTE DRILL

DEPTH CHART



OFFENSE

QB	STEPHEN GARCIA	REID MCCOLLUM
TB	BRIAN MADDOX	JARVIS GILES
WR	JASON BARNES*	TORI GURLEY
WR	MOE BROWN	JOE HILLS
TE	WESLYE SAUNDERS	ANDREW POWER
LT	JARRIEL KING*	KYLE NUNN
LG	TERRENCE CAMPBELL*	LEMUEL JEANPIERRE
C	GARRETT ANDERSON*	SEAVER BROWN
RG	T.J. JOHNSON	KEVIN YOUNG
RT	HUTCH ECKERSON	QUINTIN RICHARDSON
WR	DION LECORN	D.L. MOORE

DEFENSE

DE	CLIFTON GEATHERS	DEVIN TAYLOR
DT	NATHAN PEPPER*	KENNY DAVIS
DT	TRAVIAN ROBERTSON	LADI AJIBOYE*
DE	CLIFF MATTHEWS*	CHAZ SUTTON
LB	RODNEY PAULK	JOSH DICKERSON
LB	ERIC NORWOOD*	SHAQ WILSON
LB	ALONZO WINFIELD	DARIAN STEWART
CB	STEPHON GILMORE	BRANDAN DAVIS
FS	CHRIS CULLIVER*	ANTONIO ALLEN
SS	DARIAN STEWART*	DEVONTE HOLLOMAN
CB	AKEEM AUGUSTE	ADDISON WILLIAMS

SPECIAL TEAMS

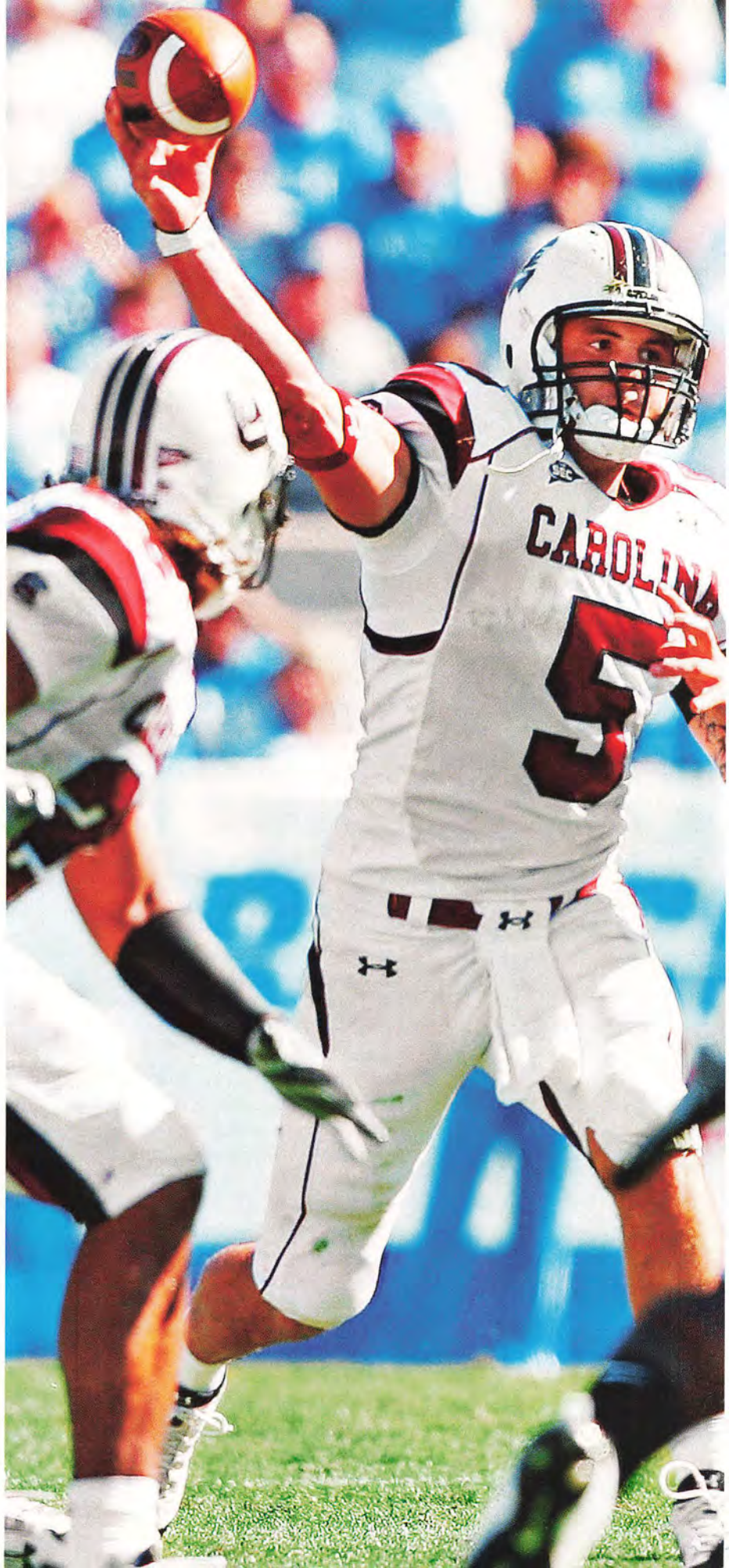
P	SPENCER LANNING
K	SPENCER LANNING ADAM YATES
PR	AKEEM AUGUSTE KR CHRIS CULLIVER

*Returning starter

TELLING NUMBER

159.23

Average passing yards allowed per game by South Carolina's defense, best in the conference and second nationally. It was the second straight year that the Gamecocks ranked in the top five in passing defense.



Garcia threw for 832 yards and six TDs in eight games in '08, but he also had eight interceptions.

KEY RETURNEES

FS **CHRIS CULLIVER** JUNIOR

One of two starting defensive backs returning in '09, Culliver made 60 tackles and three interceptions last season after playing wide receiver as a freshman.

QB **STEPHEN GARCIA** SOPHOMORE

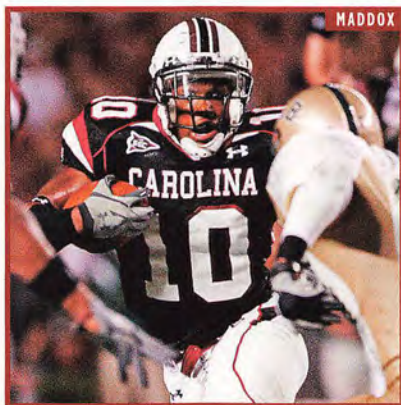
He's the best option at QB, so this is a make-or-break season for Garcia. "He has a really good arm, he can make all the throws," says quarterbacks coach G.A. Mangus. He just needs to be consistent.

LB **ERIC NORWOOD** SENIOR

His nine sacks in '08 were second best in the SEC, and he'll have help at middle linebacker from junior Rodney Paulk, who sat out last year with a knee injury. "He is versatile and good at everything he does," linebackers coach Ellis Johnson says of Norwood.

DT **NATHAN PEPPER** SENIOR

Pepper returned to the starting lineup last season after redshirting in '07 because of a knee injury. He had five tackles for loss and 23 total tackles, and his 26 career starts are the most among returning players.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

RB **BRIAN MADDOX** JUNIOR

Has 38 carries for 135 yards and a TD in his career

A SOUTH CAROLINA ALL-STATE RUNNING back in high school, Maddox should get more touches in '09, with last season's leading rusher, Mike Davis, lost to graduation. "He's got good size, and he's actually learning how to be a good running back," coach Steve Spurrier says of Maddox. "He's learning how to run forward and make one cut and go, without getting knocked backward." Maddox and sophomore Eric Baker are the only two backs with game experience.

TOP RECRUIT

CB **STEPHON GILMORE**

South Carolina's Mr. Football was 15-0 last season

HE'S LISTED AT CORNER, BUT GILMORE rushed for 1,331 yards, passed for 1,771 and accounted for 37 touchdowns as a state championship quarterback at South Pointe (S.C.) High in '08. "We just gave him a little bit of that shotgun spread offense and let him concentrate mostly on defense right now," says Spurrier. "He's a player to watch."

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

November 9, 1987



WHEN THE FIRST DRAMATIC NOTES of *Also sprach Zarathustra* blare over the loudspeakers at Williams-Brice Stadium in Columbia, S.C., fans go wild. That theme has introduced some big productions—the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Elvis Presley's act—and now it heralds the coming of the South Carolina football team and the Gamecocks' magical pass-catching combination of sophomore quarterback Todd Ellis and senior wingback Sterling Sharpe [above].

Ellis set NCAA freshman records during the 1986 season for total offense (2,975 yards), passing yardage (3,020) and touchdown passes (20). Sharpe is the Gamecocks' best receiver ever, with 156 catches for 2,346 yards.

"Sterling is like a 10-speed bike," says Ellis. "He's got a different gear for every situation." Ellis has a few gears, too, but they all run more slowly than Sharpe's. Sharpe is a splendid athlete who could play a bunch of positions. Ellis would have trouble at any place but quarterback. Sharpe leaves observers staring at stopwatches in disbelief; he has run the 40-yard dash in a blazing 4.4 seconds. Ellis can be timed without a second hand.

Coach Joe Morrison mused about his two stars: "Ellis just brought that presence with him out of high school, and when Sharpe runs in a straight line, folks miss him." Gamecocks fans won't miss either of them, from now right through bowl season.

—Douglas S. Looney

SI VAULT

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THE HITS KEEP ON COMING

After a flirtation with the draft, playmaking linebacker Eric Norwood is back in garnet and black to administer more black and blue

SOUTH CAROLINA'S 31-10 LOSS TO IOWA IN THE OUTBACK Bowl made Eric Norwood's decision a lot easier. The junior linebacker had been leaning toward submitting his name for the NFL draft, but after three losses in a row he definitely was ready to move on. "I was telling myself there was nothing else left for me to do here," says Norwood,

who already held the school record for career tackles for loss (43) and was four away from tying the school's alltime sacks record.

Immediately following the bowl game Norwood declared for the draft, but he still sought the advice of family, friends and former coaches. A call from former South Carolina and NFL running back Duce Staley, a friend and mentor, stopped him in his tracks.

"I think [next season] he can show how versatile he really is," says Staley. "I didn't want to be negative. I just wanted him to weigh the pros and cons."

It was the talk with Staley that ultimately changed Norwood's mind. "I could have been drafted any round and gotten cut," he says. "I'd be 21 years old, with three years of college, no degree, out in the real world looking for a job."

Norwood had struggled to earn a college scholarship because of his poor grades in high school, but after finally being admitted to South Carolina the summer before his freshman year, he began sitting at the front of his classes and "actually studying," as he puts it.

"I always told Eric you can be anything you want," says his mother, Anna, "because when you're *determined* to get it done, you're going to get it done." He even earned a spot on the dean's list. "That was big," says Anna.

Now Norwood is on track to graduate in December with a B.A. in criminal justice, and this season he'll also have a second chance to prove his worth as a linebacker after excel-

ling as a defensive end in his first two seasons.

Norwood's seven sacks in 2006 tied for tops on the team, and the following year he was voted first-team All-SEC by the league coaches after setting a school record with 19½ tackles for loss. But his coaches thought he could better serve the team at linebacker, and Norwood didn't argue. "I was a 6' 1" defensive end," says Norwood, who understood he had a better shot at playing linebacker in the NFL. "It's not the prototype."

He had played some linebacker in high school but didn't look like an SEC linebacker yet. "Losing weight was the hardest thing," says Norwood, who dropped close to 30 pounds. His greatest sacrifice? "McDonald's, McDonald's, McDonald's."

By the time the '08 season began, Norwood was down to around 255 pounds, and his increased mobility served him well: He was second on the team with 75 tackles and led with nine sacks and 14½ tackles for loss. "When he's on the edge rushing outside and blitzing, all those things come very naturally to him," says linebackers coach Ellis Johnson. "Two things he's probably still developing are dropping back in zone coverage and playing as an inside linebacker against the run."

The senior looks forward to improving his own game and leading the Gamecocks' defense in '09. "We've got a couple of new guys we got to break in," says Norwood. "We need to get our chemistry back that we had last year and just get that swag back." With Norwood returning, that task will be a whole lot easier. □

Norwood led the Gamecocks with **nine sacks** and **14½ tackles** for loss.



Quick and powerful, Norwood made a smooth transition from defensive end to linebacker last season, throwing his 6' 1" 255-pound body into his search-and-destroy mission. The goal this season is to improve his technique in pass coverage and to better stop the run when he's playing inside.





TENNESSEE

THE VOLUNTEERS

KEYS FOR '09: WHO WILL START AT QB? > BRYCE BROWN > STRONG DEFENSE

TRYING TO GET BACK TO THE TOP

New coach Lane Kiffin has been in the spotlight, but he hopes the Vols will be the ones making the headlines in '09 | TEXT BY KEVIN ARMSTRONG

WHILE NEW COACH LANE KIFFIN has been throwing rocks at other SEC programs since he was hired on Dec. 1, the former quarterback (Fresno State, 1994-96) has also been focused on shaking things up in Knoxville by introducing his own pro-style offense and defense.

Returning quarterbacks Jonathan Crompton (a senior) and Nick Stephens (a junior) both floundered in 2008, throwing a combined eight touchdowns and eight interceptions as Tennessee averaged just 17.3 points per game—a performance that contributed to Phillip Fulmer's departure after 17 seasons as the Vols' head coach. But there is hope.

Kiffin's system will feature a power running game, and depth is not an issue in the backfield. Senior tailback Montario Hardesty (289 yards, six TDs) offers power, and sophomore Tauren Poole gives Kiffin speed, but it may be true freshman Bryce Brown who gets the bulk of the carries. Brown rushed for 1,872 yards and 30 touchdowns as a high school senior, and coaches believe he has game-breaking ability. "Whether they use me as a tailback or a slotback, I am ready to contribute," says Brown, who has impressed Vols veterans in summer workouts.

With Tennessee desperately in need of a big-play receiver, it was no surprise that Kiffin antagonized Florida coach Urban Meyer about recruiting Nu'Keese Richardson, who is expected to make an immediate impact. Of the returning wide-outs, only Gerald Jones (30 catches for 323 yards) and Austin Rogers (14 for 180) had more than 11 catches in '08.

As the QB situation continues to play out, defense will be the Vols' greatest strength. Lane's father, Monte, the former Buccaneers defensive coordinator, brings a wealth of experience to guide an already talented lineup that has five starters returning. The keystone is junior strong safety Eric Berry (page 38). With senior Rico McCoy (87 tackles) anchoring the linebackers and senior Wes Brown (nine quarterback hurries) benefiting from the line's depth, Monte Kiffin has plenty of weapons to run his Tampa Two scheme.

"The more I can teach, the better," says the 69-year-old Kiffin. "I'd spend all day with them if I could."

Kiffin's new scheme has helped Crompton (8) and fellow QB Stephens gain confidence this spring.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: PATRICK MURPHY/RACE; WADE PAYNE/KNOXVILLE NEWS SENTINEL/AP; CHRIS WILLIAMS/ICON SM

2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Lane Kiffin
(1st year)

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Jim Chaney

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Monte Kiffin

2008 RECORD: 5-7
(3-5, 5th SEC East)

FINAL AP RANK: NR

RETURNING STARTERS:
Offense 7, Defense 5

WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS:
10, 5, 9, 10, 5

2008 RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)

RUSHING OFFENSE: 89 (9)

PASSING OFFENSE: 107 (11)

TOTAL OFFENSE: 116 (11)

RUSHING DEFENSE: 12 (3)

PASSING DEFENSE: 4 (2)

TOTAL DEFENSE: T-3 (T-1)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER	
5	WESTERN KENTUCKY
12	UCLA
19	at FLORIDA
26	OHIO
OCTOBER	
3	AUBURN
10	GEORGIA
24	at ALABAMA
31	SOUTH CAROLINA
NOVEMBER	
7	MEMPHIS
14	at OLE MISS
21	VANDERBILT
28	at KENTUCKY

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

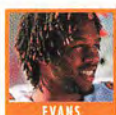
On Sept. 19 the Vols may pay the price for the barbs that Kiffin directed at Florida during recruiting season. Games against Ohio and Western Kentucky are must-wins before Tennessee gets into the teeth of SEC competition. The road may turn ugly in Tuscaloosa and Oxford.

REPORT

THE VOLUNTEERS SEC EAST

2 MINUTE DRILL

DEPTH CHART



EVANS



HARDESTY



COTTAM

OFFENSE

QB	JONATHAN CROMPTON*	NICK STEPHENS
TB	MONTARIO HARDESTY	TAUREN POOLE
FB	KEVIN COOPER*	AUSTIN JOHNSON
WR	GERALD JONES*	AUSTIN ROGERS
TE	JEFF COTTAM	LUKE STOCKER*
LT	CHRIS SCOTT*	DALLAS THOMAS
LG	VLADIMIR RICHARD*	CORY SULLINS
C	JOSH MCNEIL*	CODY SULLINS
RG	JACQUES MCCLENDON	CODY POPE
RT	JARROD SHAW	AARON DOUGLAS
WR	QUINTIN HANCOCK	DENARIUS MOORE

DEFENSE

DE	BEN MARTIN	WILLIE BOHANNON
DT	WES BROWN*	MONTORI HUGHES
NT	DAN WILLIAMS*	CHASE NELSON
DE	CHRIS WALKER	STEVEN FOWLKES
LB	RICO MCCOY*	SAVION FRAZIER
LB	NICK REVEIZ	HERMAN LATHERS
LB	LAMARCUS THOMPSON	SHANE REVEIZ
CB	BRENT VINSON	DENNIS ROGAN*
FS	STEPHAUN RAINES	PRENTISS WAGGNER
SS	ERIC BERRY*	DERRICK FURLOW
CB	ART EVANS	MARSALOUS JOHNSON

SPECIAL TEAMS

P	CHAD CUNNINGHAM	STEVEN HENSLEY
K	DANIEL LINCOLN*	ETHAN INGHAM
PR	GERALD JONES*	KR DENNIS ROGAN*

*Returning starter

TELLING NUMBER

34

Age of Lane Kiffin, the youngest Division I football coach in the country. His decision to hire his experienced father to steer the defense was a good one.



FROM FAR LEFT: MARVIN GENTRY/US PRESSWIRE; JOHN GREEN/CSM; SCOTT HALLERAN/GETTY IMAGES; JIM BROWN/US PRESSWIRE; WADE PAYNE/ICON SMI; JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN

Last season the versatile Jones led the Vols with 30 catches and four receiving touchdowns.

KEY RETURNEES

SS ERIC BERRY JUNIOR

The All-America and SEC Defensive Player of the Year has started every game of his Tennessee career. In 2008 he was the only player in the country to have an interception in seven different games. Berry had a quiet spring as he recovered from shoulder surgery, but he should be at full strength when the '09 season begins.

QB JONATHAN CROMPTON SENIOR

Believe it or not, the redshirt senior received death threats as a result of his uneven play last season. He hopes to make a fresh start in '09, and that looks likely thanks to new coach Lane Kiffin's pro style offense, which suits Crompton's strong arm.

KR-CB DENNIS ROGAN JUNIOR

Though he started 10 games at cornerback, Rogan also averaged 24.9 yards per kick return in '08. His 1,081 yards rank him fifth alltime on Tennessee's career list.

DT WES BROWN SENIOR

The Vols' 6' 4", 257-pound beast hurried opposing QBs 12 times last year, the most for a Tennessee player, and he should benefit from his shift to left tackle. He had 37 tackles at defensive end in '08.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

WR GERALD JONES JUNIOR

Had 714 all-purpose yards and five touchdowns in '08

THE 6-FOOT, 199-POUND JUNIOR CUT A wide swath last season, but he needs to emerge as a playmaker now. Lining up at four positions, Jones had at least one 40-yard gain in each situation, including rushes from the quarterback position. His leadership will be necessary for a young receiving corps that is working with an uncertain quarterback situation. It is likely that Jones will continue to be used occasionally in direct-snap situations to help give the offense a spark.

TOP RECRUIT

TB BRYCE BROWN

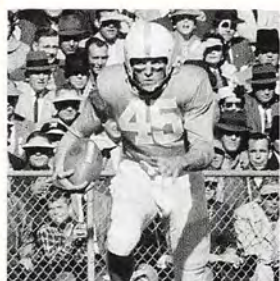
Rushed for 1,872 and 30 touchdowns as a senior in '08

THE TOP NATIONAL PROSPECT ACCORDING to Rivals.com in '09 originally committed to Miami. After a change of heart and a whirlwind wooing process by Kiffin, though, the Wichita, Kans., native turned his attention to Rocky Top. A blur out of the backfield, the 6-foot signee will make an immediate impact.

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

March 28, 1977



THE PILOT WAS WAITING IN THE warmth of the hangar with Tennessee assistant coach Robbie Franklin, who had alerted [new coach] Johnny Majors to the emergency. A coveted defensive lineman from Kentucky had signed a Tennessee grant-in-aid but was now wavering. Woody Hayes of Ohio State had paid the boy a visit. The visit set off vibrations.

The university-owned Navajo and its pilot had been Majors's steady companions since early January. There had been rush trips like this one to help get some meat on the bones of a Tennessee team that had gone 6-5 in 1976 and got Bill Battle fired.

With the plane airborne, Majors loosened his seat belt and took out a cigarette, exposing hands surprisingly large for a small man. As the Tennessee tailback in the mid-1950s [above], he played at 162 pounds and led the team in rushing, passing and punting; played safety; was a unanimous All-America and second to Paul Hornung in the '56 Heisman balloting.

Recruiting, Majors said, is never easy, but the degree of difficulty varies.

"I don't want a kid whose arm you have to twist," he said. "I told the Tennessee players at our first meeting, 'It should mean a lot to you to play here. That orange shirt meant something to the great players who were here before you. Regardless of when we become champions, you can play like champions. Like Tennessee teams have played before. This is a fresh start.'"

—John Underwood

SI VAULT

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GRAND THEFT FOOTBALL

A second-generation Volunteer, stealthy safety Eric Berry is speeding his way to the top of the NCAA's alltime list for interception return yards

VOLUNTEERS SAFETY ERIC BERRY IS A CONSTANT threat to steal passes on the field, so it's no surprise that when he relaxes in his apartment, the 5' 11" junior enjoys simulating his on-field thievery by playing *Grand Theft Auto*—a violent video-game series based on the criminal underworld. Trained by his coaches to pilfer passes, the

sneaky hitman performs virtual robberies with the controller in hand. "When the cops come," Berry says, "I just press the restart button instead of surrendering."

The fear of being caught has driven Berry since he was a sophomore at Georgia's Creekside High in 2004. That year, he intercepted a pass thrown by the McIntosh High quarterback and returned it from a yard deep inside his team's end zone. But he slowed as he approached the goal line and was dragged down at the one. Berry vowed never to let that happen again.

"It wasn't that I was slow," Berry says. "I just didn't know how to run." He joined the track team to learn how to better pace himself. Later that year he sunk his spikes into the starting blocks at the state meet but did not rise into the proper stance when the runners were called into the set position. Suffering from an itchy nose, he thought a false start would be called if he sneezed. Taking off from his knees, Berry won the heat and later took the 200-meter state title. As a junior he anchored the 4 × 400 relay, collecting another state title. "He's like no other we've had," says Creekside track coach Scott Vaughan.

But playing football was his passion. A two-way starter as a senior at Creekside, Berry engineered the triple option as quarterback and wreaked havoc for his positional counterparts as a safety. Able to identify tendencies, he took advantage of his dual vantage points. "It's like being a spy," Berry says of playing both ways.

When it came time to choose a college, Berry

thought he'd have more success playing in the secondary. Recruitniks with knowledge of his family tree could have predicted where he would go: His father, James, had been a three-year starter at tailback and a captain at Tennessee in 1981. Plus, three starters had left the Vols' defensive backfield the season before, giving Berry the chance to contribute right away.

He started the first game of the '07 season and began building his case for SEC Defensive Fresh-

man of the Year in Week 3 at the Swamp. Midway through the third quarter Berry picked off a Tim Tebow pass and ran 96 yards, which tied for the third-longest touchdown return in UT history. Since then he has surpassed the SEC's record for career interception return yardage and needs just

15 yards to break former Florida State defensive back Terrell Buckley's alltime NCAA record of 501. "If I'm an NFL team, he's my first pick no matter what," says new Tennessee defensive coordinator Monte Kiffin, who is eager to use Berry in his

vaunted Tampa Two defensive schemes. Berry was forced to slow down last December after his All-America season. Having tweaked his left shoulder against Mississippi State during an October win, he opted to undergo arthroscopic surgery to repair an undisclosed injury that he says dates back to peewee football. By the time he was cleared to participate in workouts this spring, he was back to full speed despite being held out of all contact drills.

That couldn't have been easy for a stealthy defender who hates getting caught. □

"If I'm an NFL team, he's my first pick no matter what," says Monte Kiffin.



Berry was mobbed by teammates after returning an interception for a TD against Vandy on Oct. 22 (above). He had pickoffs in seven games and led the nation with 265 return yards. The safety added 72 tackles and became the first Vol to claim unanimous All-America honors since 1990.





VANDERBILT

THE COMMODORES | KEYS TO '09: PICKING A QB > BRODERICK STEWART'S RETURN

NOT JUST BLOWING SMOKE

Led by a highly ranked defense, the Commodores look to build on the program's first winning season in 26 years | TEXT BY BILL TROCCHI

VANDERBILT COACH BOBBY JOHNSON IS amused when he hears questions that include phrases such as *turning the corner* or *getting over the hump*. "Everybody thinks you get over the hump one time, and everything is going to be downhill," says Johnson, who last season led Vanderbilt to its first bowl victory since 1955. "In this league, that hump keeps going [up]." Still, with 18 starters back from a squad that beat five bowl teams en route to the school's first winning season since 1982, Vanderbilt cannot be considered the SEC's doormat in 2009.

If the Commodores are going to make back-to-back bowl appearances for the first time, it will be on the strength of the best defense Johnson has coached in his eight years in Nashville. The front seven returns intact for a unit that was 29th in the country in scoring defense. Pass-rushing specialist Broderick Stewart, a redshirt senior, has recovered from a broken leg, and redshirt sophomore Chris Marve and senior Patrick Benoist each logged more than 100 tackles last year. However, despite the return of standout cornerback Myron Lewis (*page 44*) and safety Ryan Hamilton, both seniors, the secondary has question marks now that cornerback D.J. Moore has moved on to the NFL.

Offensively the Commodores ranked No. 118 in total offense in '08, but they covered up some of their deficiencies by limiting turnovers (their +9 turnover margin was second in the SEC) and scoring 88.6% of the time they were in the red zone. All five offensive linemen, tight end Brandon Barden (28 catches, tops among freshman TEs) and senior running back Jared Hawkins (623 yards) are back. The wide receiving corps will lean on UConn transfer Terence Jeffers, who led the Huskies in receiving as a sophomore in 2007. Johnson has not named a starting quarterback but expects to make a call early in August. Sophomore Larry Smith started the Music City Bowl victory over Boston College, but fifth-year senior Mackenzie Adams came off the bench to lead two comeback wins.

After a slow start under Johnson (20-50 before '08), Vandy has made progress. "As time goes on," Hamilton says, "people are going to realize we can run with anyone."

Johnson (below) will once more rely heavily on his defense and leading tackler Benoist (30).



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: DON MCPHAIL/US PRESSWIRE; ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES; DON MCPHAIL/US PRESSWIRE

2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Bobby Johnson (8th year)
27-56 (12-46 in SEC)

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Ted Cain

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Jamie Bryant

2008 RECORD: 7-6
(4-4, T-3 SEC East)

FINAL AP RANK: NR

RETURNING STARTERS:
Offense 9, Defense 9

WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS:
2, 5, 4, 5, 7

RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)

RUSHING OFFENSE: 74 (7)

PASSING OFFENSE: 113 (12)

TOTAL OFFENSE: 118 (12)

RUSHING DEFENSE: 69 (10)

PASSING DEFENSE: 15 (3)

TOTAL DEFENSE: 30 (8)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER

- 5 WEST CAROLINA
- 12 at LSU
- 19 MISSISSIPPI STATE
- 26 at RICE

OCTOBER

- 3 MISSISSIPPI
- 10 at ARMY
- 17 GEORGIA
- 24 at SOUTH CAROLINA
- 31 GEORGIA TECH

NOVEMBER

- 7 at FLORIDA
- 14 KENTUCKY
- 21 at TENNESSEE

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

The hope each year is to get to six wins, and three of Vandy's four nonleague games are manageable. Finding three more in home games with Mississippi State, Ole Miss, Kentucky and Georgia is conceivable, but road games at LSU, Florida and Tennessee are not promising.

REPORT

THE COMMODORES SEC EAST

2 MINUTE DRILL

DEPTH CHART



SMITH



MARVE



LAUER

OFFENSE

QB	LARRY SMITH	MACKENZI ADAMS*
RB	JARED HAWKINS*	KENNARD REEVES
WR	JUSTIN WHEELER*	AKEEM DUNHAM
WR	UDOM UMOH	TERENCE JEFFERS
TE	BRANDON BARDEN*	AUSTIN MONAHAN
LT	REILLY LAUER*	KYLE FISCHER*
LG	KYLE FISCHER*	RYAN CUSTER
C	BRADLEY VIERLING*	CHRIS AARON
RG	ERIC HENSLEY*	JOEY BAILEY
RT	THOMAS WELCH*	JAMES WILLIAMS
WR	ALEX WASHINGTON	JOHN COLE

DEFENSE

DE	BRODERICK STEWART*	TERIAL BRANNON
DT	GREG BILLINGER*	ROB LOHR
DT	ADAM SMOTHERMAN*	T.J. GREENSTONE
DE	STEVEN STONE*	TIM FUGGER
LB	JOHN STOKES*	BRENT TRICE
LB	CHRIS MARVE*	TRISTAN STRONG
LB	PATRICK BENOIST*	NATE CAMPBELL
CB	MYRON LEWIS*	JAMIE GRAHAM
SS	RYAN HAMILTON*	MICAH POWELL
FS	SEAN RICHARDSON	JOEL CALDWELL
CB	CASEY HAYWARD	ALAN STRONG

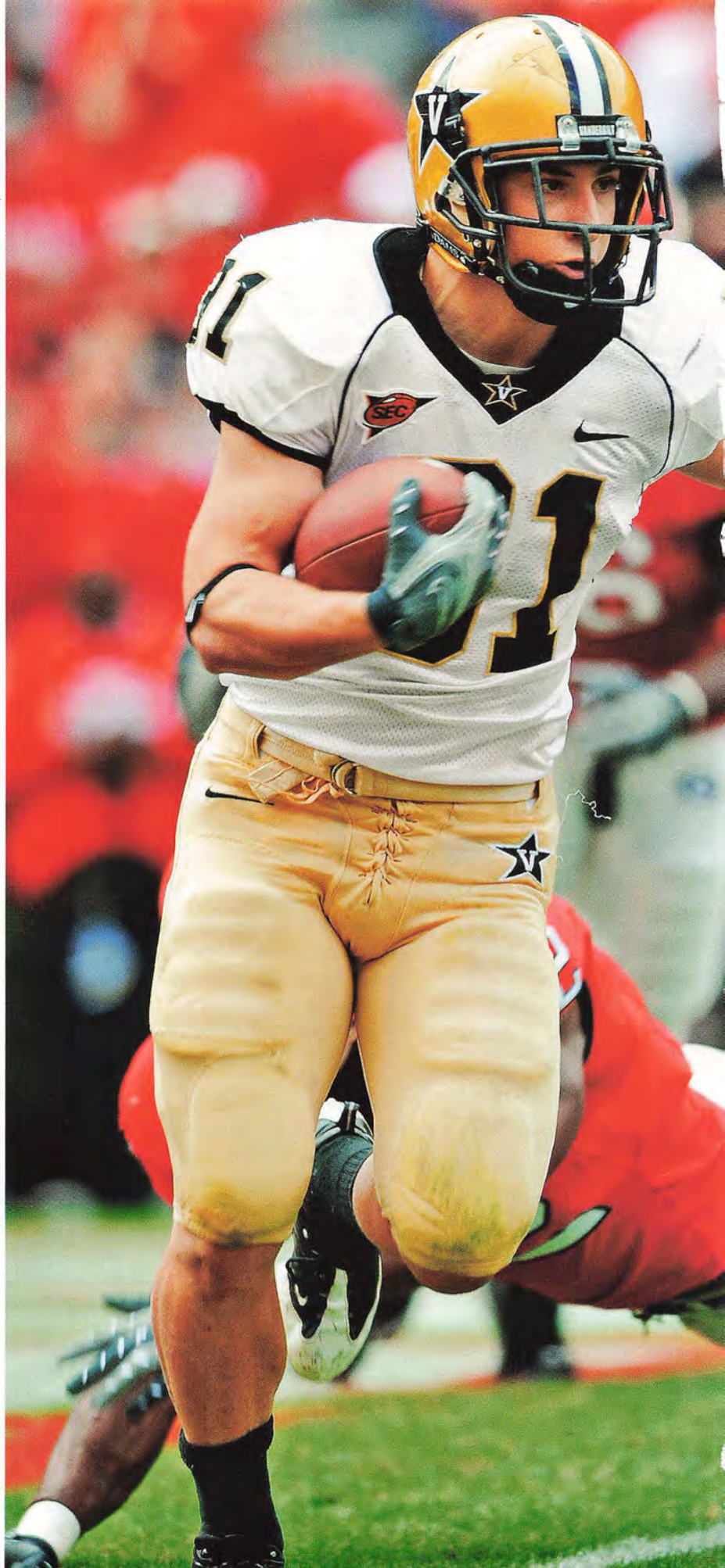
SPECIAL TEAMS

P	BRETT UPSON*	RICHARD KENT
K	RYAN FOWLER	JOHN LAUGHREY
PR-KR	JAMIE GRAHAM	GASTON MILLER

*Returning starter

TELLING NUMBER

16 The number of wins Vanderbilt has had over the last three seasons—seven more than it had the previous three seasons (2003–05), when Jay Cutler was starting at quarterback.



Hawkins isn't flashy, but he's reliable. Last season's top rusher has yet to fumble in 242 career carries.

KEY RETURNEES

RB JARED HAWKINS SENIOR

The team's leading rusher last season, Hawkins is game to carry the load. (He averaged 4.3 yards per carry.) He should get some relief with three running backs in this year's recruiting class.

TE BRANDON BARDEN SOPHOMORE

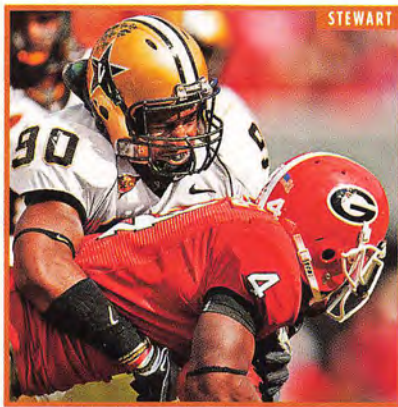
After taking over as the starter in Week 3, the Virginia Tech transfer led the team in touchdown receptions (4) and was second in receptions (28) and yards (209). He will be counted on for his blocking as Vanderbilt rebuilds its passing attack.

DE BRODERICK STEWART SENIOR

Expected to be recovered this fall from a broken leg he suffered against Tennessee in Game II, the 6' 5" Stewart compiled five sacks last season before his injury, led the team in tackles for loss (9½) and forced three fumbles in 11 games.

LB CHRIS MARVE SOPHOMORE

Honored as a freshman All-America by *The Sporting News* and *Rivals.com*, he led the SEC in forced fumbles (four) and made 105 tackles at middle linebacker.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

WR TERENCE JEFFERS JUNIOR

At 6' 2", 220, Jeffers is expected to put up big numbers

THE TRANSFER FROM UCONN WILL BE eligible this fall after sitting out 2008. Jeffers was an impact player in his two years in Storrs, starting eight games as a true freshman and leading the Huskies in receptions (44), receiving yards (582) and touchdowns (5) as a sophomore. Jeffers is an athletic receiver who can also block. He will eventually be the primary target in a Vanderbilt receiving corps that has been decimated by graduation.

KEY SIGNED

RB WESLEY TATE

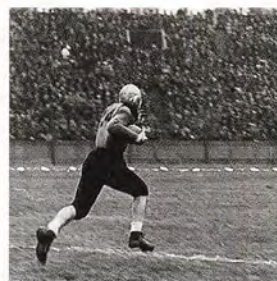
Speedster was state champ in the 100-meter dash

THE YOUNGER BROTHER OF NOTRE DAME wide receiver Golden Tate, the middle Tennessee native should be in the running back rotation soon enough. Tate ran for 42 touchdowns in his career at Pope John Paul II and was nominated for Tennessee's Mr. Football. At 6' 2", 210, Tate should prove to be a durable back who can also catch the ball out of the backfield.

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

December 5, 1955



WHEN RAY MORRISON, ONE OF FOOTBALL's greatest razzle-dazzlers, returned to his alma mater, Vanderbilt, to coach in '35, he pulled off possibly his most confounding and slickest stratagem: a hidden-ball play. The trick won for Vanderbilt an upset victory over Louisiana State, 7-6, in Nashville on Oct. 23, 1937.

Dutch Reinschmidt, playing the T-quarterback position, took the ball at midfield, spun and headed for a wide left-end sweep, preceded by a swarm of Commodores. But what was this? Down on the LSU 25-yard line a man in black pants and gold jersey, neck bowed resolutely and unmistakably carrying the ball, hurried toward the goal in huge strides. But for the thunderous roar of amazement from the crowd, who had sighted him, LSU wouldn't have spotted the ballcarrier, right guard Greer Ricketson [above], even then.

Years later Ricketson explained the trick. "When Reinschmidt took the ball from center," he said, "he quickly placed it on the ground behind our left guard, Bill Hays. I pulled out as if to join the interference. Just as I got behind Hays, I tripped—on purpose—over him. He was squatting over the ball like a hen hatching an egg.

"I picked up the ball and simply ran down the right side of the field. I was afraid I'd be tackled any instant. Another thing I remember," said Ricketson of his only career TD, "is that I thought I'd probably stub my toe before I reached the end zone."

—Fred Russell

SI VAULT

For free access to all Commodores stories and photographs from the SI archives, go to SI.com/vault



PROFILE

THE COMMODORES MYRON LEWIS, CB, SENIOR > POMPANO BEACH, FLA.

ALL WAYS ON THE BALL

Intercepting passes, making tackles and blitzing the quarterback, Myron Lewis is a playmaker in Vanderbilt's formidable defense

WITH 1:36 LEFT IN THE MUSIC CITY BOWL ON Dec. 31, Myron Lewis jumped up, intercepted a Boston College pass at the 43-yard line, touched both feet inbounds and wrapped up the biggest Vanderbilt win in 53 years, a 16-14 victory over the Eagles. "He's got great hands, so the only

thing I was looking at was his feet," said Vanderbilt assistant head coach Bruce Fowler after the game. "I knew he would catch it."

It was the second time that Lewis clinched a landmark win for Vanderbilt last season. He had also sealed the Commodores' 14-13 victory over Auburn in October. His latest interception secured Vandy's first winning season since 1982.

In '09 Vanderbilt again can make a strong bid to go to a bowl, and the team will be counting on Lewis to make up for the loss of cornerback DJ. Moore, who led the SEC in interceptions last season and was drafted in the fourth round by the Chicago Bears in April. The 6' 3", 202-pound Lewis is bigger than Moore but has the same type of athleticism.

Some scouts project Lewis as a safety in the NFL, but Vanderbilt will keep him at corner on a strong defensive unit that has nine returning starters. One way the Commodores coaching staff takes advantage of Lewis's size is by frequently blitzing him, which resulted in five sacks (tying him for the team lead) in '08, to go along with 76 tackles. "He's tall and has long arms, so he can keep people away from him and use his hands when he rushes the passer," says defensive coordinator Jamie Bryant.

Lewis had five interceptions as a junior, and the Vanderbilt coaches say that wasn't just a result of teams' throwing away from Moore. The Pompano Beach, Fla., native helped the 'Dores rank 15th nationally against the pass

in '08, and he is already being rated on various 2010 NFL mock drafts as a top 10 corner.

Lewis is on track to graduate in December with a degree in Human and Organizational Development, after, he hopes, another winning season for Vandy. When he starts preparing for the NFL draft, he can look to his own family for tips. Lewis's brother Hanik Milligan played four seasons and was a Pro Bowl special-teamer with the Chargers. Two of his

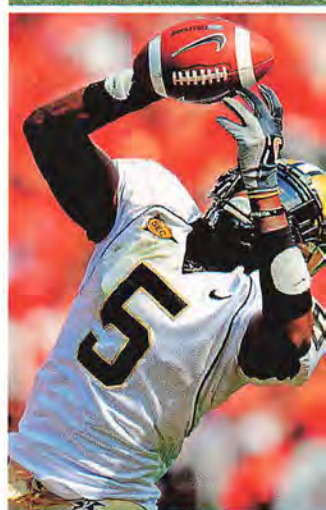
other brothers—Justin Hazel and Hamin Milligan—played defensive back in college at Montana and Houston, respectively, and Hamin played in the Arena Football League for five years. "With our experiences he should have a leg up on how to prepare for things and

what to expect," says Hamin. "He needs to stay humble and take care of things, and he should be all right."

That shouldn't be a problem for the soft-spoken Lewis, who knows cornerback is a position at which a player can go from hero to goat in one play. For example, just five minutes before his game-saving interception against Boston College, Lewis bit on a fake, which allowed Eagles quarterback Dominique Davis to complete a 55-yard touchdown to take a 14-13 lead with 6:38 remaining.

"Some players get some hype, and they backtrack," Lewis says. "They think hype and fame are going to take them where they want to be. I need to stay humble, win games and graduate, and everything will take care of itself." □

Lewis is bigger than Moore and just as athletic as the Bears' draft pick.



Lewis has a professional's cool, whether he's being burned (against Rice, bottom) or ball-hawking (against Georgia, above). His fourth-quarter interception in the Music City Bowl was cause for celebration (top) for number 5 and the Commodores, perhaps ushering in a new era in Nashville.



Auburn's Kodi Burns (18) ran up against a couple of angry Hogs in a 25-22 Arkansas victory last season.



SCOUTING REPORTS > THE SI VAULT > PLAYER PROFILES

SEC WEST

ALABAMA CRIMSON TIDE

48 | Greg McElroy is the key to the season

50 | 1992: Stallings turns the Tide

52 | Terrence Cody, big man on campus

ARKANSAS RAZORBACKS

54 | Act II of the Bobby Petrino Show

56 | 1964: Broyles finally defeats Royal

58 | Michael Smith wants to be The Guy

AUBURN TIGERS

60 | Untaming of the Tigers

62 | 1971: The Year of Pat Sullivan

64 | Anthony Coleman's teacher

LSU TIGERS

66 | Title hopes ride on a rebuilt defense

68 | 1959: Billy Cannon runs to glory

70 | Ciron Black: Big man with a big heart

MISSISSIPPI STATE BULLDOGS

72 | The spread comes to Starkville

74 | 1980: The Bear meets the Bulldogs

76 | Anthony Dixon is rarin' to run

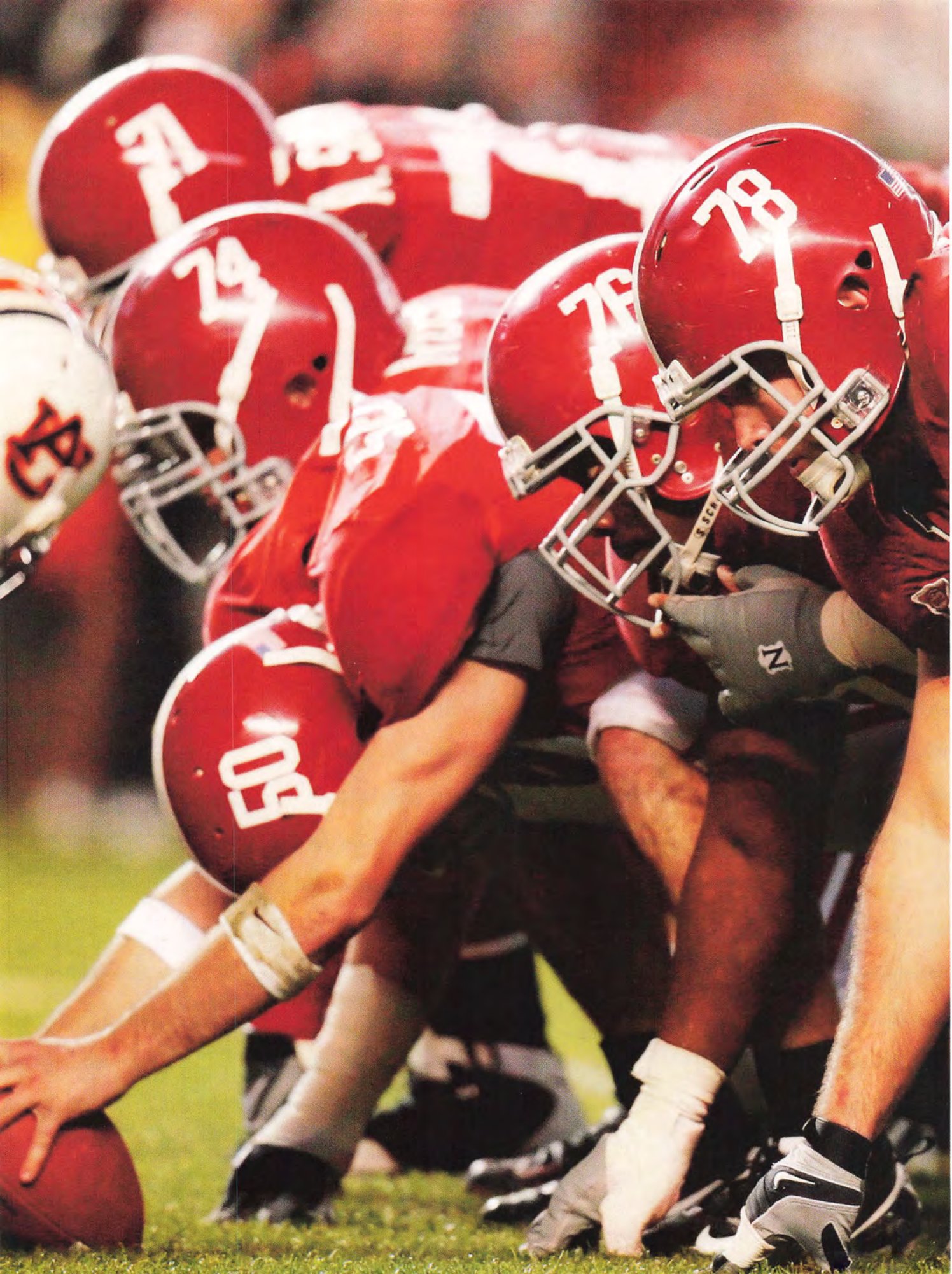
MISSISSIPPI REBELS

78 | Ole Miss has become a team to beat

80 | 2001: Eli shows some Manning magic

82 | Jevan Snead has the Heisman look

WISLEY HUNT/BETTY IMAGES



ALABAMA

THE CRIMSON TIDE

KEYS TO '09: NEW STARTING QB GREG MCELROY > REPLACING ANDRE SMITH

NO LONGER JUST WATCHING THE TIDE

After three seasons of waiting, junior quarterback Greg McElroy steps in as the key to Alabama's SEC and BCS hopes | TEXT BY LARS ANDERSON

LET THE RECORD SHOW THAT GREG MCELROY officially won over the hearts and minds of the Crimson Tide faithful on the second play of his second series as Alabama's starting quarterback in its spring game. That's when McElroy dropped back to pass, checked off two covered receivers, then rifled a tight spiral to Julio Jones, who was streaking down the right side of the field. Jones caught the ball in stride for a 52-yard touchdown, prompting a cathartic roar from the 84,050 in attendance at the A-Day game.

"That was a play I'll remember for a long time," says McElroy, who replaces three-year starter John Parker Wilson. "I'm getting more comfortable all the time and feel like I'm becoming more of a leader."

If Alabama gets merely serviceable play out of McElroy, the Tide should be in the national title hunt, because its defense will be among the best in the country. Nine starters return from a unit that finished third in the nation last season in total defense and second in rush defense.

The biggest question marks are on offense, where the Tide has only four starters returning. The key is McElroy, who may be one of the most patient quarterbacks in the country. At Southlake Carroll High in Texas he waited for two years behind Chase Daniel—who went on to star at Missouri—before he got to start. In Tuscaloosa he waited another three years behind Wilson. McElroy's strengths are that he's not prone to making mistakes and is not easily rattled—two qualities that helped him win the starting job over redshirt freshman Star Jackson. McElroy was impressive on A-Day, throwing for 189 yards and two touchdowns.

But McElroy needs time to throw, and the Tide must replace Outland winner Andre Smith, a left tackle who surrendered only one sack in 2008. James Carpenter, a junior college transfer, was one of the team's most improved players this spring and should man Smith's old spot.

"Our offensive line is getting better every day," says McElroy. "We know what kind of defense we're going to have, so it's going to be our job to play smart football, not turn the ball over and not put our defense in bad situations. If we can do that, we can have an outstanding year."

Coach Nick Saban (below) is pinning the season on McElroy's (12) proving himself as a starter.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: MARVIN GENTRIOUS PRESSWIRE; ORIO NELSON; JOHN DAYDEN/REUTERS PRESSWIRE

2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Nick Saban (3rd year)
19-8 (12-4 in SEC)

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Jim McElwain

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Kirby Smart

2008 RECORD: 12-2
(8-0, 1st SEC West)

FINAL AP RANK: 6

RETURNING STARTERS:
Offense 4, Defense 9

WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS:
6, 10, 6, 7, 12

2008 RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)

RUSHING OFFENSE: 30 (3)

PASSING OFFENSE: 97 (9)

TOTAL OFFENSE: 63 (6)

RUSHING DEFENSE: 2 (1)

PASSING DEFENSE: 30 (7)

TOTAL DEFENSE: T-3 (T-1)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER

5 vs. VIRGINIA TECH
12 FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL
19 NORTH TEXAS
26 ARKANSAS

OCTOBER

3 at KENTUCKY
10 at MISSISSIPPI
17 SOUTH CAROLINA
24 TENNESSEE

NOVEMBER

7 LSU
14 at MISSISSIPPI STATE
21 TENNESSEE-CHATTANOOGA
27 at AUBURN

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

Alabama should be unbeaten as it heads into Miles-Saban III if the Tide can get past an improving Ole Miss squad on the road. LSU should be another bloodbath. Once again, the Tide avoids Florida in the regular season but may see the Gators in Atlanta in December.

REPORT

THE CRIMSON TIDE SEC WEST

2 MINUTE DRILL

DEPTH CHART



DAVIS



ARENAS



JOHNSON

OFFENSE

QB	GREG MCELROY	STAR JACKSON
RB	MARK INGRAM	TERRY GRANT
WR	JULIO JONES*	DARIUS HANKS
TE	COLIN PEEK	PRESTON DIAL
LT	JAMES CARPENTER	TYLER LOVE
LG	MIKE JOHNSON*	BARRETT JONES
C	WILLIAM VLACHOS	DAVID ROSS
RG	BRIAN MOTLEY	CHANCE WARMACK
RT	DREW DAVIS*	J. BOSWELL
TE	BRAD SMELLEY	CHRIS UNDERWOOD
WR	MIKE MCCOY*	MARQUIS MAZE

DEFENSE

DE	BRANDON DEADERICK*	MARCELL DAREUS
NG	TERRENCE CODY*	JOSH CHAPMAN
DE	L. WASHINGTON	LUTHER DAVIS
LB	CORY REAMER*	JERRELL HARRIS
LB	ROLANDO MCCLAIN*	CHRIS JORDAN
LB	DONT'A HIGHTOWER*	C. HIGGENBOTHAM
LB	ERYK ANDERS*	BRANDON FANNEY
CB	JAVIER ARENAS*	CHRIS ROGERS
FS	ROBBY GREEN	ALI SHARRIEF
SS	JUSTIN WOODALL*	MARK BARRON
CB	KAREEM JACKSON*	MARQUIS JOHNSON

SPECIAL TEAMS

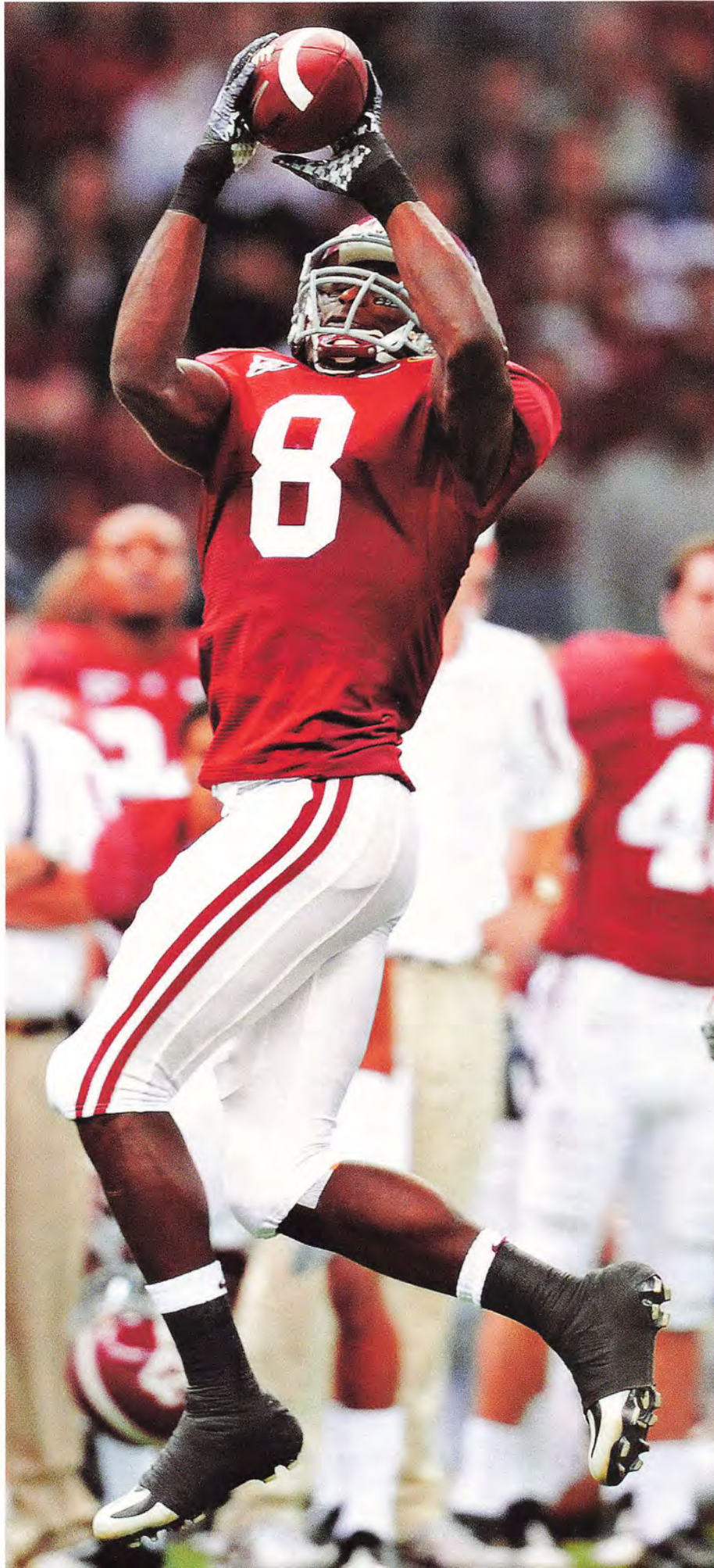
P	P.J. FITZGERALD*	HEATH THOMAS
K	LEIGH TIFFIN*	COLIN GALLAGHER
PR-KR	JAVIER ARENAS*	MARQUIS MAZE

*Returning starters

TELLING NUMBER

13.54

Yards that Javier Arenas, the NCAA's active punt return leader in career returns, yards and TDs, has averaged on returns, the most in Alabama history.



At 6' 4" with great hands, speed and athleticism, Jones has the talent to be a huge star in Tuscaloosa.

KEY RETURNEES

WR JULIO JONES SOPHOMORE

Jones broke every receiving record for Tide freshmen last year, catching 58 passes for 924 yards and four touchdowns. Offensive coordinator Jim McElwain plans to use Jones at both flanker and split end and frequently put him in motion to avoid double coverage.

LB ROLANDO McCLAIN JUNIOR

As a sophomore in 2008 McClain led the team in tackles (95) and helped the Tide defense hold its opponents under 100 yards rushing in 11 of its 14 games. A third-team AP All-America last year, he should contend for the Butkus Award.

LG MIKE JOHNSON SENIOR

Johnson, who has started 27 straight games, will need to be a coach on the field for his inexperienced linemates. He'll be counted on to help groom center William Vlachos and tackle John Michael Boswell.

CB KAREEM JACKSON JUNIOR

A speedster with above-average hands, Jackson is the kind of lockdown corner every defensive coach covets. He's started 26 games for Alabama and has made 107 tackles and four interceptions over his two previous seasons.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

LB DONT'A HIGHTOWER SOPHOMORE

Eleventh true freshman to start in 'Bama opener since '72

FAST AND POWERFUL, HIGHTOWER HAS the tools to be the linchpin of the Tide defense for the next few years. This spring the coaching staff experimented with moving Hightower on passing downs from his inside linebacker position to the Jack position, which is a hybrid defensive end and outside linebacker, where he can provide added pass rush off the edge.

TOP RECRUIT

RB TRENT RICHARDSON

Bruising back should fit nicely into power running game

FLORIDA COACH URBAN MEYER WANTED running back Trent Richardson so badly that he personally hosted him when Richardson visited the Swamp. It didn't matter. The 5' 11", 220-pound Richardson, ranked as the No. 2 running back in his class by Scout.com, chose Alabama.

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

October 26, 1992



ON OCT. 9, 1982, ALABAMA FOOTBALL was at its final high-water mark under Bear Bryant. The Crimson Tide was 5-0, ranked No. 2 nationally and coming off a 42-21 rout of Penn State. The next step for Alabama was to go into Knoxville and get its 12th straight win over Tennessee. Then came Saturday, Oct. 16: Tennessee 35, Alabama 28. After that, all was ebb.

On Dec. 15 Bryant announced his retirement. Six weeks later he was dead at 69 of a heart attack. Alabama football slipped into a dark age of grief and discontent from which it would not fully emerge until Oct. 17, 1992, when the Tide again went to Knoxville, but this time it won 17-10. Alabama left Neyland Stadium with a 7-0 record, a No. 4 ranking and a 17-game winning streak.

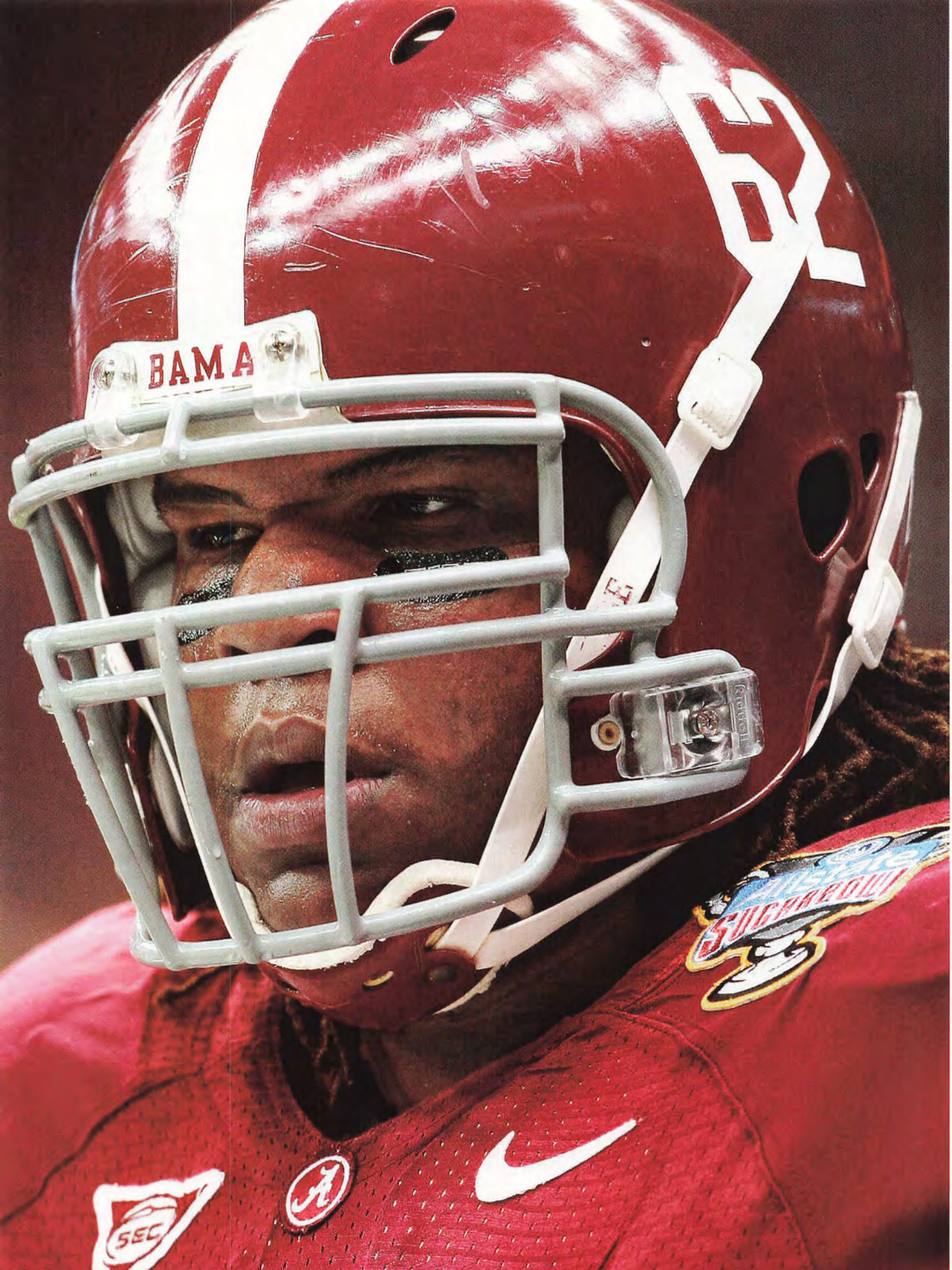
The Tide is led by a coach who has gained the faithful's acceptance. Not only does Gene Stallings [above] walk and talk like Bryant, but he is also starting to look like the Bear. Even his game plan was vintage Bryant: Keep it simple, keep it brutal; run over them on offense and swarm on defense.

Before the game Jimmy Fuller, an assistant coach who also played for Bryant, sat in the shadow of the tower from which Bryant used to reign over practice. "There are some who still think Coach Bryant comes out on that tower," said Fuller. "They've never let that go. And there's certainly nothing wrong with that."

—Ed Hinton

SI VAULT

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PROFILE

THE CRIMSON TIDE | TERRENCE CODY, NG, SENIOR > FORT MYERS, FLA.

THE MARVEL OF MOUNT CODY

Having shed weight to better rush the passer, 'Bama's All-America run stopper will be an even more frightening sight for opposing offenses

NEARLY EVERYWHERE TERRENCE CODY GOES THESE days in Tuscaloosa, Ala., he is a marked man. He is, after all, hard to miss. At 6' 5", 354 pounds, Cody, a nose guard, is not only Alabama's biggest player but also one of the largest men in college football. And ever since he became a national sensation last season, his first for the Crimson

Tide, Mount Cody, as he's affectionately called at the Capstone, has been routinely stopped in grocery stores and restaurants and asked by fans to pose for pictures or sign autographs. Though the junior college transfer has only been on the team for one season, he is, by all accounts, the Crimson Tide's most popular player. "It's an everyday thing," Cody says. "I pretty much can't go anywhere without anyone knowing me."

Cody's popularity increased in December when he decided to bypass the NFL draft and return to Alabama for his senior season. He most likely would have been a top 20 pick, but Cody wanted to come back to Tuscaloosa to become a more all-around player.

Last season he was used primarily on first and second downs as a run stopper. His 24 tackles, including 4½ for losses, earned him first-team All-America honors, but he was often pulled out of the game on third-down passing situations.

"If we can improve his mobility a little, he might become a little better pass rusher for us and push the pocket in the middle," says coach Nick Saban. "[That] to me is the most important thing about pass rush. So the quarterback can't step up and attack the middle of the field."

To become more agile, Cody has lost about 20 pounds from his playing weight of 375 last season. That, in turn, was 45 pounds less than his high of 420, which was once his playing weight at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. Cody only played two years of high

school football, at Riverdale (Fla.) High—he had academic difficulties his sophomore and junior seasons—and pondered giving up football after he didn't receive any Division I scholarship offers. "My teachers [at Riverdale] helped me out," Cody says. "They kept pushing me."

So Cody went to Mississippi Gulf Coast. After two seasons in Perkinston, Bulldogs coach Steve Campbell called dozens of Division I schools, asking them to come see his massive nose guard.

But the only coach who ultimately showed interest was Saban, who offered Cody a scholarship on the condition that he lose weight. Specifically, Cody had to drop three pounds a week before he reported for the 2008 preseason camp. "It was real tough," Cody said. "I had to do a lot

of running and extra work. There were a couple of times I was like, 'Is this for me?'"

The hard work paid off. After Cody got his weight under control, Saban inserted him into the starting lineup, where he was an immediate force. Against Clemson in the season opener, he was so punishing that the Tigers had to double- and triple-team Cody, which opened lanes into the backfield for other Tide defenders. Alabama won the game 34–10, Cody was named the SEC defensive lineman of the week, and the legend of Mount Cody was underway.

"Terrence sets the tone for our entire team," says Alabama quarterback Greg McElroy. "Trust me, it's not fun as quarterback to look across the line of scrimmage and see Terrence. He's a physical freak."

Had he entered the NFL draft, Cody **would likely have been a top 20 pick.**



Already fearsome against the run (with 24 tackles, including 4½ for losses, in 2008), Cody has dropped 20 pounds and is set on becoming a more all-around defensive player—good news for his coach, who is looking forward to setting him loose on quarterbacks in third-down passing situations.





WAR MEMORIAL STADIUM



PIG SOOIE

REGIONAL

TOL DOWN TO GO BALL ON QTR TOL

0

1

3

ARKANSAS

THE RAZORBACKS

KEYS FOR '09: IMPROVEMENT ON D > STOP THE RUN > START SEASON FAST

GETTING 'BACK TO THE BIG TIME

With plenty of contributors returning for Arkansas, expectations for the Hogs are high in Bobby Petrino's second season | TEXT BY ALBERT CHEN

LAST YEAR THE FAYETTEVILLE FAITHFUL got a glimpse of what is possible under first-year head coach and offensive guru Bobby Petrino, with the offense showing flashes of explosiveness. The Razorbacks—who were 4–3 in games decided by four points or fewer—had just two conference wins, but those were against LSU and Auburn, teams projected before the season to finish one-two in the SEC West. Year two of the Petrino era begins with heightened expectations, now that the Baby 'Backs (last season 16 true freshmen saw playing time, tied for third most in the nation) are a year older. Arkansas's leaders in rushing, receiving, scoring, all-purpose yards, tackles, sacks and interceptions all return.

Petrino's offense was effective last year—it was one of just 10 teams in the country and one of four BCS schools to have a 1,000-yard rusher and average 250 yards passing a game. With 259.6 yards a game, the Razorbacks had the second-most potent passing attack in the conference.

They are poised to put up even bigger numbers with Michigan transfer Ryan Mallett under center. And there's depth at running back, with a duo of dynamic playmakers—true freshman Knile Davis and USC transfer Broderick Green (as long as he becomes eligible)—behind undersized starter Michael Smith (*page 58*). “I think we were a lot better as the year went on,” Petrino says of the offense. “I think the difference this year is that we'll have a faster unit.”

Arkansas will make noise in the SEC West only if the defense can improve from 2008, when it allowed a conference-high 31.2 points a game. Opponents ran all over the Razorbacks, as Arkansas surrendered 170.8 rushing yards a game, by far the most in the SEC. But that should change with a more experienced unit. The team's top 10 tacklers, led by senior tackle Malcolm Sheppard (team-high 6½ sacks) and sophomore linebacker Jerry Franklin (team-high 87 tackles), all return this fall. “Last year it was like pulling teeth to get us to hit and concentrate on the physical part of the drills,” Petrino said of the defense after a spring practice. “This year they are real eager and excited about it.”

Petrino has several playmakers on offense, including the highly touted Mallett (15).



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: WESLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES; NELSON CHENALTY/US PRESSWIRE; WESLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES

2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Bobby Petrino (2nd year)
5–7 (2–6 in SEC)

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Paul Petrino

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Willy Robinson

2008 RECORD: 5–7
(2–6, T-4 SEC West)

FINAL AP RANK: NR

RETURNING STARTERS:
Offense 8, Defense 9

WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS:
5, 4, 10, 8, 5

2008 RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)

RUSHING OFFENSE: 97 (10)

PASSING OFFENSE: 23 (2)

TOTAL OFFENSE: 49 (4)

RUSHING DEFENSE: 90 (12)

PASSING DEFENSE: 54 (10)

TOTAL DEFENSE: 72 (12)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER

- 5 MISSOURI STATE
- 19 GEORGIA
- 26 at ALABAMA

OCTOBER

- 3 vs. TEXAS A&M
- 10 AUBURN
- 17 at FLORIDA
- 24 at OLE MISS
- 31 EASTERN MICHIGAN

NOVEMBER

- 7 SOUTH CAROLINA
- 14 TROY
- 21 MISSISSIPPI STATE
- 28 at LSU

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

After their opening game the Razorbacks will face a grueling stretch during which they play four out of six games against bowl teams from last year, including three on the road. If the Hogs can break even through October (a big if), they could be bowl-bound.

REPORT

THE RAZORBACKS SEC WEST

2 MINUTE DRILL

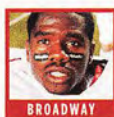
DEPTH CHART



CRAWFORD



TEJADA



BROADWAY

OFFENSE

QB	RYAN MALLET	TYLER WILSON
TB	MICHAEL SMITH*	DE'ANTHONY CURTIS
WR	JOE ADAMS*	CARLTON SALTERS
WR	LONDON CRAWFORD*	GREG CHILDS
WR	LUCAS MILLER*	JARIUS WRIGHT
TE	D.J. WILLIAMS*	BEN CLEVELAND
LT	RAY DOMINGUEZ*	GRANT FREEMAN
LG	GRANT COOK	SETH OXNER
C	WADE GRAYSON*	CLAY BEMBERG
RG	MITCH PETRUS	MICHAEL AGUIRRE
RT	DEMARCUS LOVE*	MATT HALL

DEFENSE

DE	JAKE BEQUETTE*	DAMARIO AMBROSE
NT	ZACH STADTHER*	ALFRED DAVIS
DT	MALCOLM SHEPPARD*	PATRICK JONES
DE	ADRIAN DAVIS*	TENARIUS WRIGHT
LB	FREDDY BURTON*	BRET HARRIS
LB	WENDEL DAVIS*	JERMAINE LOVE
LB	JERRY FRANKLIN*	JELANI SMITH
CB	ISAAC MADISON*	GREG GATSON
SS	JERICO NELSON	CHRIS RAGGETT
FS	ELTON FORD*	MATT HARRIS
CB	RAMON BROADWAY	JERELL NORTON

SPECIAL TEAMS

P	BRITON FORESTER	RYAN MALLET
K	ALEX TEJADA*	BRITON FORESTER
PR	MICHAEL SMITH*	KR DENNIS JOHNSON

*Returning starter

TELLING NUMBER

99

Percent of Arkansas's 2008 rushing yards by players who return in '09. The Hogs also have players returning who accounted for 97% of their receiving production.



Franklin was all over the field as a freshman, leading the team in tackles and interceptions.



KEY RETURNEES

DT MALCOLM SHEPPARD SENIOR

The leader of the defense, Sheppard was a common presence in opposing backfields in 2008, leading the team in sacks (6½) and tackles for loss (14½).

TE D.J. WILLIAMS JUNIOR

This 6' 2", 251-pound bruiser carried a big load in 2008. The Mackey Award semifinalist accounted for nearly 25% of Arkansas's receptions and receiving yards. Last year he set school records for catches by a tight end in a season (61) and a game (10, against Ole Miss).

LB JERRY FRANKLIN SOPHOMORE

A freshman All-America last year, he led the Hogs in tackles (87), fumble recoveries (two) and interceptions (two). Poised for a big season, Franklin has bulked up 10 pounds from a year ago and is now 237.

WR JOE ADAMS SOPHOMORE

Last season, as a freshman, he finished third on the team with 31 catches and added a touchdown. The athletic wideout (he also threw a touchdown pass last year, against Auburn) had at least one reception in each of the Razorbacks' games.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

QB RYAN MALLETT SOPHOMORE

Big-time talent makes highly anticipated debut

IN 2007 MALLETT APPEARED IN 11 GAMES as a freshman at Michigan before leaving for Arkansas after Rich Rodriguez's hiring in Ann Arbor. Mallett, out of Texarkana, Texas, was the No. 2-rated quarterback recruit in '07 and is the kind of player who could thrive under Bobby Petrino's high-flying offense. "He's got real good arm strength," says Petrino. "He does a real nice job in our quick passing game. He throws the ball with a quick release and moves around better than I would have thought."

TOP RECRUIT

RB RONNIE WINGO

Razorbacks feel the need for speed with freshman back

THE 6' 3", 220-POUND SPEEDSTER FROM St. Louis will soon be a dynamic playmaker in Petrino's offense. Among 2009's national signees, he was regarded as one of the five fastest players. (At the 2007 AAU National Junior Olympics he was a 200-meter champ.) In one game last year Wingo rushed for 403 yards and scored seven touchdowns.

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

October 26, 1964



FOR FOUR BURDENSOME WEEKS a sign in the dressing room of the No. 1-ranked University of Texas had read, THEY SAY WHAT GOES UP MUST COME DOWN—BUT WHO SAYS WHEN? Well, Arkansas said. On Oct. 17, 1964, in Austin, in a game replete with heroism, frenzy and suspense, the Longhorns surrendered their throne to the deserving Razorbacks by a score of 14-13. It is only partly true that Arkansas won when Texas gambled on a two-point conversion try and failed in the final minute and 27 seconds. Actually, Arkansas won all night long, to the astonished regret of 66,000 spectators.

Arkansas coach Frank Broyles finally defeated his good friend and rival, Darrell Royal, in the Southwest Conference's annual big game because his Razorbacks played mistake-free football. They were quick, alert and poised, and they pressed Texas into slight errors on two critical plays. A pass from Texas quarterback Marv Kristynik to halfback Hix Green for an attempted conversion after a violent, final-period comeback by Royal's team was just inches too low. When it hit the Memorial Stadium turf incomplete, so did Royal. He knelt, placed his thumb and forefinger between his eyes and stared into the night, frozen, stunned and perhaps relieved. Across the field Broyles was exultant—it was only the second time in seven years that he had beaten Texas and Royal. "The greatest victory in the history of Arkansas," he said. —Dan Jenkins

SI VAULT

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PROFILE

THE RAZORBACKS | MICHAEL SMITH, RB, SENIOR > TALLAHASSEE, FLA.

THE SOO-WEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

Yet another Razorbacks runner, Michael Smith, is fueling grand aspirations in year two of coach Bobby Petrino's spread offense

FOR TWO YEARS HE BIDED HIS TIME. FOR TWO YEARS Arkansas running back Michael Smith waited in the shadow of not one but two outstanding running backs, Darren McFadden and Felix Jones. In 2006 and '07 McFadden and Jones—both 1,000-yard rushers—made up one of the most dynamic backfield tandems in college football history. In the

meantime Smith, who had arrived in Fayetteville the same year as McFadden and Jones, waited and watched. "All I could tell myself was, My time will come," says Smith.

After both McFadden and Jones had All-America seasons in '07, they declared for the NFL draft, and at last it was Smith's turn. But few believed that a 5' 7", 176-pound tailback with 81 career carries entering '08 could possibly shoulder the load. "When people talked about me as the heir apparent, it was heir apparent followed by a question mark," Smith says. "I'm no fool. I understood that. I just wanted to erase that question mark."

That's exactly what he did. Last season Smith was Arkansas's most pleasant surprise. He helped the Razorbacks' ground attack—what many expected to be a weakness—become a potent weapon in first-year coach Bobby Petrino's spread offense. Smith rushed for 1,072 yards and eight touchdowns to become the ninth player in school history to break the 1,000-yard barrier. He led the SEC in rushing yards per game for five straight weeks and ended the year second in the league and 22nd in the nation. Despite his diminutive frame he became a one-man workhorse for the Razorbacks. On Oct. 18 against Kentucky, Smith rumbled for a career-high 192 yards on 35 carries; even the two-time All-America, McFadden, never touched the ball so many times in a game.

"He doesn't take a lot of big hits. He's very

good at slipping and sliding," Petrino says. "He's got really good vision, good instincts and cuts very well, but his toughness, I think, has helped us as much as anything."

Smith was an unheralded recruit out of Rickards High in Tallahassee, Fla., who lacked experience at tailback. "Growing up, I always played fullback and was surprisingly good at it," he says. "I was fast, but I was pretty fat. I always ate a lot of candy and Little Debbie cakes. But on the football field I would get hit, and I would just take people for a ride."

During high school, after dropping his baby fat, Smith moved to tailback, and though he had a successful season at the position his senior year, rushing for 800

yards, he had modest expectations. "I lived about a mile from Florida A&M University, and that's pretty much where I thought I'd go," he says. When Arkansas came knocking, he was as surprised as anyone. "Being at an SEC school is beyond anything I imagined."

Now all eyes will be on Smith to see if he can become one of the nation's elite running backs. Petrino plans to use Smith more as a receiver out of the backfield but still hopes to give him 20 to 25 carries a game. After his heavy workload in '08 some wonder if Smith's small frame can sustain more pounding, but he's as determined as ever. "I'm sure there are still people who question whether I can be The Guy," he says. "But I know I can build off what I did last year and surprise even more people." □

"His toughness, I think, has helped us as much as anything," says Petrino.



A second team All-SEC pick in '08, Smith was just as likely to reverse field as he was to channel his inner fullback and bowl over defenders, as he demonstrated against Tulsa (below). Smith had 509 yards against six Top 25 teams (including Tulsa and Texas), sixth-best in the nation.





AUBURN

THE TIGERS | KEYS FOR '09: SETTLE ON A QUARTERBACK > FIND RECEIVERS > GET PHYSICAL ON D

A NEW FACE TO RESTORE THE ROAR

In its attempt to return to college football's elite, Auburn hired a coach who's familiar with getting the Tigers to the top | TEXT BY BILL TROCCHI

GENE CHIZIK'S LAST CONNECTION WITH Auburn football was the 2004 team that went 13-0, finished No. 2 in the country and had four players drafted in the first round

the following April. Chizik was the defensive coordinator on that team, which he says "had a swagger and a confidence that we would win every game." Returning as head coach five years later, Chizik sees a team that "physically, looks different. . . . Realistically, we have a long way to go."

Chizik's mission is to turn around a program that last year suffered its first losing season since 1999 and forced out coach Tommy Tuberville after 10 years. The Tigers endured a tumultuous '08 that saw first-year offensive coordinator Tony Franklin fired after six games and the rest of the staff gone after going 5-7. Chaos continued through the ensuing coaching search. Chizik, who was 5-19 in two seasons at Iowa State, was not a popular choice among the Auburn faithful. But he quelled some of the unrest with the hiring of offensive whiz Gus Malzahn from Tulsa and well-respected defensive coordinator Ted Roof.

Malzahn—who says the Tigers will employ a "run, play-action" attack, not the wide-open spread on which he built his reputation—has a big challenge with a unit that was 111th in the nation in scoring. The quarterback spot is unsettled, the receivers are inexperienced and the line lost two starters. What the offense will have is steady senior running back Ben Tate and break-away threats in backs Mario Fannin and freshman Onterio McCalebb, the top high school running back in some circles.

Defensively, the mandate from Chizik is to be more physical, and the team did more hitting in the spring than any upper-classman could remember. End Antonio Coleman (*page 64*) is the headliner, but he'll have plenty of help from a unit that has seven starters returning and ranked 14th nationally in points allowed (18.0).

The last time the Tigers left the field, they were licking their wounds after a 36-0 loss to Alabama. That embarrassment still stings the players more than the 5-7 record or the removal of Tuberville. "Alabama was like rubbing dirt in our face," says linebacker Craig Stevens. "That has motivated us all spring."

A decent defense and a stable of running backs, including Tate (44), greet Chizik's return to Auburn.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GREGG DEGENRETT/IMAGES; JAMIE MARTIN/AP; PAUL ARNELLO/GETTY IMAGES

2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Gene Chizik (1st year)

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR: Gus Malzahn

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR: Ted Roof

2008 RECORD: 5-7 (2-6, 1-4 SEC West)

FINAL AP RANK: NR

RETURNING STARTERS: Offense 7, Defense 7

WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS: 13, 9, 11, 9, 5

2008 RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)

RUSHING OFFENSE: 69 (6)

PASSING OFFENSE: 99 (10)

TOTAL OFFENSE: 104 (8)

RUSHING DEFENSE: 54 (8)

PASSING DEFENSE: 19 (5)

TOTAL DEFENSE: 29 (7)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER

- 5 LOUISIANA TECH
- 12 MISSISSIPPI STATE
- 19 WEST VIRGINIA
- 26 BALL STATE

OCTOBER

- 3 at TENNESSEE
- 10 at ARKANSAS
- 17 KENTUCKY
- 24 at LSU
- 31 MISSISSIPPI

NOVEMBER

- 7 FURMAN
- 14 at GEORGIA
- 27 ALABAMA

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

The Tigers have eight home games, including ones against the top two teams in the SEC West (Alabama, Ole Miss), but no open date until Nov. 21. Eight victories and a bowl berth would be a solid season in year one of Chizik's rebuilding project.

REPORT

THE TIGERS | SEC WEST

2 MINUTE DRILL

DEPTH CHART



BURNS



BYRUM



MCNEIL

OFFENSE

QB	KODI BURNS*	NEIL CAUDLE
RB	BEN TATE*	ONTERIO MCCALEBB
HB	MARIO FANNIN	TOMMY TROTT*
WR	TERRELL ZACHERY	MONTEZ BILLINGS*
WR	TIM HAWTHORNE	QUINDARIUS CARR
LT	LEE ZIEMBA*	A.J. GREENE
LG	BYRON ISOM*	BART EDDINS
C	RYAN PUGH*	MIKE BERRY
RG	MIKE BERRY	JARED COOPER
RT	ANDREW MCCAIN	VANCE SMITH
WR	DARVIN ADAMS	DEREK WINTER

DEFENSE

DE	MICHAEL GOGGANS*	ANTOINE CARTER
DT	MIKE BLANG	ZACH CLAYTON
DT	JAKE RICKS	DERRICK LYKES
DE	ANTONIO COLEMAN*	CAMERON HENDERSON
LB	ELTORO FREEMAN	SPENCER PYBUS
LB	CRAIG STEVENS*	WADE CHRISTOPHER
LB	JOSH BYNES*	ADAM HERRING
CB	WALTER MCFADDEN*	T'SHARVAN BELL
SS	MIKE MCNEIL*	MIKE SLADE
FS	ZAC ETHERIDGE*	DREW COLE
CB	NEIKO THORPE	AAIRON SAVAGE

SPECIAL TEAMS

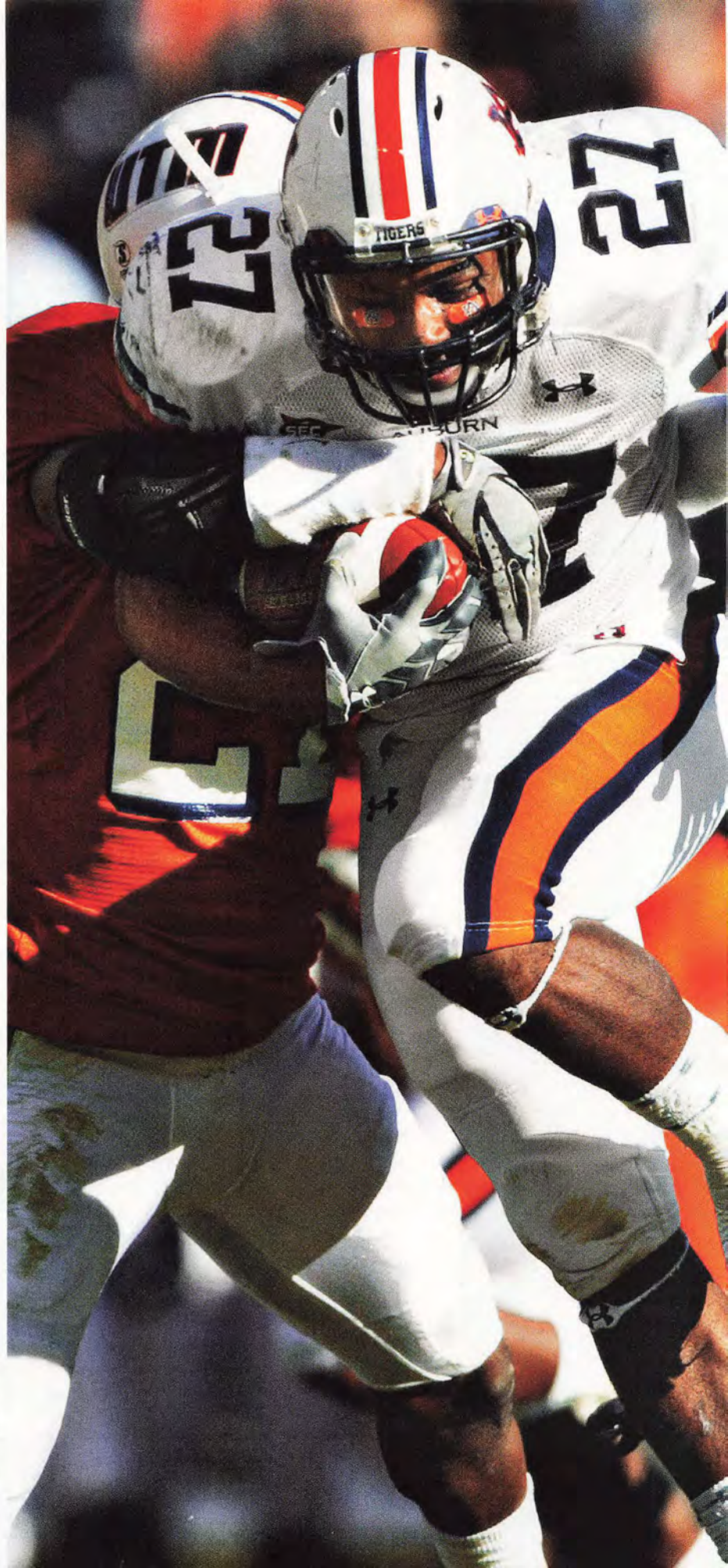
P	CLINTON DURST*	RYAN SHOEMAKER
K	WES BYRUM*	MORGAN HULL
PR-KR	MARIO FANNIN	QUINDARIUS CARR

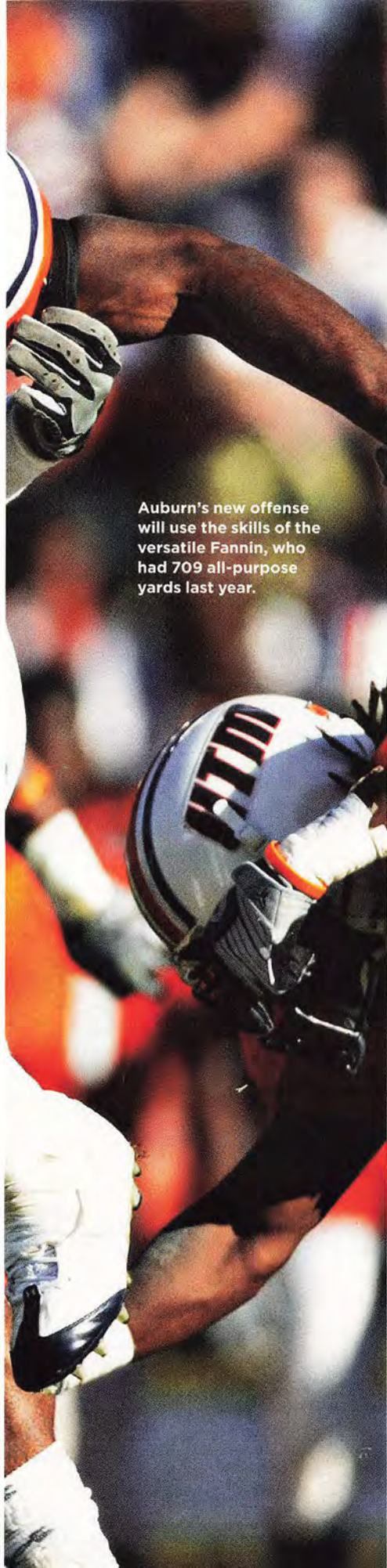
*Returning starter

TELLING NUMBER

9

Touchdowns scored by the Tigers' offense in SEC play last year, one fewer than Tulsa's scored against UTEP on Oct. 18 under Gus Malzahn, now Auburn's offensive coordinator.





Auburn's new offense will use the skills of the versatile Fannin, who had 709 all-purpose yards last year.

KEY RETURNEES

DE ANTONIO COLEMAN SENIOR

One of the SEC's top pass rushers, Coleman had 14½ sacks and 29 tackles for loss over the last two seasons. He was leaning toward leaving for the NFL but decided to return for his fifth year and will be the defense's top player.

SS MIKE MCNEIL JUNIOR

McNeil broke his right leg in the spring but should be ready for the season. He was second on the team in tackles and had a sack and fumble recovery as a sophomore, his first season as a starter.

H-BACK MARIO FANNIN JUNIOR

Auburn's biggest home run threat on offense will move around a bit in offensive coordinator Gus Malzahn's scheme. Fannin will play H-back, tailback and receiver to take advantage of the big-play ability he showcased with two long touchdowns against Georgia in 2008.

LB JOSH BYNES JUNIOR

Bynes led Auburn with three interceptions after replacing the injured Tray Blackmon after four games. He made 11 tackles in his first start and finished fifth on the team in tackles from his middle linebacker slot.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

LB CRAIG STEVENS JUNIOR

New scheme brings out best from active linebacker

STEVENS HAS 20 STARTS UNDER HIS BELT and appears poised for a big season after meshing well in new defensive coordinator Ted Roof's aggressive system this spring. The active Stevens was fourth on the team in tackles (54) in 2008 but came up with just one turnover. With Roof emphasizing big plays, look for those numbers to climb and for Stevens to emerge as one of the biggest playmakers on a stout D.

TOP RECRUIT

RB ONTERIO MCCALEBB

Game-breaker has a chance to contribute from Day One

THE HIGHLY RECRUITED RUNNING BACK spent last season at Hargrave Military Academy after failing to qualify academically. The 5' 10", 165-pound McCalebb enrolled at Auburn in January and in spring drills showed the breakaway ability that makes him special. He is a threat to supplant Ben Tate as the No. 1 back.

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

November 22, 1971



OBVIOUSLY, SOMEONE FORGOT TO tell Pat Sullivan that this is the year of the running back. On Nov. 13 the Auburn quarterback kept right on throwing passes, including four for touchdowns against the best defense in the SEC, as the unbeaten Tigers demolished a very good Georgia team 35-20. When the execution was completed, Shug Jordan, the Auburn coach who is about as emotional as Lincoln's statue, snorted when someone suggested that Sullivan [above] might not win the Heisman Trophy. "Maybe not," Jordan drawled, "but if someone else does get it, I'll bet he's Christ reincarnated." Then a look of horror crossed his face, and he held up a restraining hand. "Hold it. I'm a religious man, and now I'll be up all night saying Hail Marys. Maybe I had better say that if someone else gets it, he'll have to be, ah, magnificent."

For the day, Sullivan wound up with 14 completions in 24 attempts for 248 yards and the four scores. That gave him responsibility for 71 career touchdowns, tying Steve Ramsey of North Texas State and Army's Glenn Davis for the NCAA record. His yardage also built his three-year total to 6,725, placing him third on the alltime list, behind Chuck Hixson of SMU (6,884) and Jim Plunkett of Stanford (7,887).

"With one game to go," said Jordan, a twinkle building in his eyes.

"Yeah," said Sullivan with a wry grin. "Alabama."

—Pat Putnam

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PROFILE

THE TIGERS | ANTONIO COLEMAN, DE, SENIOR > MOBILE

TRYING TO MATCH A TIGER

Antonio Coleman is learning what it takes to be an All-America defensive end at Auburn from someone who was one: Tracy Rocker

AS HE HEADS TO PRACTICE EVERY DAY, SENIOR DEFENSIVE end Antonio Coleman walks by a portrait of Tracy Rocker posing with the Lombardi Award that he won in 1988. When Coleman reaches the field, he comes face-to-face with the man himself, who is now Auburn's defensive line coach. "I think it is real special to have a guy that played and was in your shoes and earned all these great accolades be here," Coleman says. "He is back to show us how he got all those awards."

Rocker is in his first year on the Auburn staff after spending one season at Ole Miss and five at Arkansas. He secured his place in history on the Plains after winning the Outland, Lombardi and SEC Defensive Player of the Year awards in '88 while leading the Tigers to an SEC championship. He was a two-time All-America, three-time All-SEC and alltime Auburn Tiger.

Coleman, who was first-team All-SEC as a junior and has earned a spot on the Lombardi watch list for 2009, has yet to reach Rocker's level. He strongly considered declaring for the NFL draft after last season, especially when coach Tommy Tuberville was forced out. Gene Chizik was hired in December, and Coleman, after meeting with him several times, decided to play a fifth year at Auburn.

"He was my first recruit," Chizik says. "We wanted him back on our defensive line. We showed him the importance of that position and [its] role on our defense."

Rocker was added to Chizik's staff nine days after Coleman announced he was returning and said he looked forward to working with the 6' 3", 257-pound senior.

"I've always kept up with the Auburn defensive guys through the years," Rocker says. "I knew who he was, but now I was going to get a chance to see if he could really play."

Rocker and Coleman **butted heads a bit early** in the spring.

Rocker and Coleman butted heads a bit early in the spring. Rocker challenged Coleman in front of the team during a practice, and depending on which story you believe, Coleman either stormed off to the training room or was kicked out by Rocker. But things settled down the following day.

"I just felt like I wasn't getting the best out of Antonio Coleman," Rocker says. "But he came in the next day and we talked, and it all boiled down to leadership. I don't have to coach him a lot. I tell him something, and he does it. He is a very low rep guy [who needs minimal repetitions to understand concepts]. We're working on him grabbing other guys and bringing them with him. My job is to make sure he doesn't settle."

Coleman, who will turn 23 before the season opener on Sept. 5, admits that being a leader on the field does not come naturally. Off the field Coleman has enjoyed plenty of success, earning a degree in criminology in less than four years (he has already started working on a second degree, in education) and being one of the most active Auburn players in community service (he, among other things, plays baseball with disabled children). With Rocker pushing him, he is looking to make his senior season a special one not only as a player but also as a leader.

"Coach Rocker is in the [College Football] Hall of Fame, and he is so humble. I respect that," Coleman said. "It is real big for me because I'm looking to get to that same level." □



The 6' 3", 257-pound Coleman led the team in three statistical categories last season—sacks (6), tackles for loss (10½) and quarterback hits (13)—en route to being named to the All-SEC first team. After he considered entering the NFL draft, Coleman returns in 2009 as a candidate for the Lombardi Award.





PUTTING THEIR BEST FOOT FORWARD

With several standout Tigers returning to Baton Rouge, LSU is again poised to make a charge on the national scene | TEXT BY ANDY STAPLES

LAST YEAR LSU'S DEFENSE WAS SUPPOSED to be one of the SEC's best, despite the loss of coordinator Bo Pelini, who left to become head coach at Nebraska. But after the defending national champs finished ninth in the league in scoring and total defense and LSU limped to a 3-5 mark in conference play, coach Les Miles knew he needed to make a change. On Jan. 5 Miles hired John Chavis, the coordinator who had kept Tennessee's defenses among the best in the SEC for most of two decades.

Miles has charged Chavis with taking a talented but underachieving group—last year the Tigers gave up at least 50 points twice and at least 31 five times—and turning it into a unit that can help contend for a title.

Chavis shook up the defense immediately. He moved senior strong safety Harry Coleman, a 13-game starter who led the Tigers in tackles in '08, to outside linebacker to take better advantage of his athleticism. Defensive end Rahim Alem and defensive tackle Al Woods, both seniors, will attack rather than simply read and react to the offense, and the defense will go after the quarterback from different angles. "The configuration is a little different," Miles said. "But how we come to the line of scrimmage and rush the passer—those things are consistent with the culture that we've created here."

That culture also includes a hard-charging running game, which ranked fourth in the SEC in '08. This is a strength, with tailback Charles Scott and offensive tackle Ciron Black (*page 70*), both of whom could have turned pro, opting to return. The Tigers will also begin the '09 season much more settled at QB. Sophomore Jordan Jefferson, who led LSU's 38-3 rout of Georgia Tech in the Chick-fil-A Bowl, is the unquestioned starter. Jarrett Lee, who started eight games in '08, and freshman Russell Shepard will back up Jefferson, who seems confident he can lead the Tigers. Jefferson will throw to senior receiver Brandon LaFell (929 yards, eight TDs), who, like Scott and Black, turned down a chance to enter the NFL draft.

The talent is there. If Jefferson and the defense measurably improve, expect the Tigers to again compete for the SEC and national titles.

Miles (below) hired Chavis to rework the D. How well Alem (84) and LSU adapt will be key in '09.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: CRYSTAL LOGG/OUTLINE PRESSURE; CHRIS GRANT/HEATH/GETTY IMAGES; DENNIS HANDEL/ICON SM

2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Les Miles (5th year)
42-11 (23-11 in SEC)

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Gary Crowton

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
John Chavis

2008 RECORD: 8-5
(3-5, 3rd SEC West)

FINAL AP RANK: NR

RETURNING STARTERS:
Offense 7, Defense 6

WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS:
9, 11, 11, 12, 8

2008 RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)

RUSHING OFFENSE: 43 (4)

PASSING OFFENSE: 71 (6)

TOTAL OFFENSE: 55 (5)

RUSHING DEFENSE: 17 (5)

PASSING DEFENSE: 73 (11)

TOTAL DEFENSE: 32 (9)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER

- 5 at WASHINGTON
- 12 VANDERBILT
- 19 LOUISIANA-LAFAYETTE
- 26 at MISSISSIPPI STATE

OCTOBER

- 3 at GEORGIA
- 10 FLORIDA
- 24 AUBURN
- 31 TULANE

NOVEMBER

- 7 ALABAMA
- 14 LOUISIANA TECH
- 21 at MISSISSIPPI
- 28 ARKANSAS

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

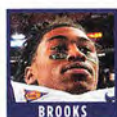
If LSU can survive back-to-back games against Georgia and Florida, the Tigers should be in fine shape as they head to Tuscaloosa for Saban Bowl III. In most years that game would decide the SEC West, but not this year, as a loaded Ole Miss team awaits on Nov. 21.

REPORT

THE TIGERS | SEC WEST

2 MINUTE DRILL

DEPTH CHART



BROOKS



EUGENE



JEFFERSON

OFFENSE

QB	JORDAN JEFFERSON*	JARRETT LEE
RB	CHARLES SCOTT*	KEILAND WILLIAMS
FB	STEVAN RIDLEY	JAMES STAMPLEY
WR	TERRANCE TOLIVER	CHRIS TOLLIVER
TE	RICHARD DICKSON*	MITCH JOSEPH
LT	CIRON BLACK*	GREG SHAW
LG	JOSH DWORACZYK	WILL BLACKWELL
C	T-BOB HEBERT	P.J. LONERGAN
RG	LYLE HITT*	CLAY SPENCER
RT	JOSEPH BARKSDALE*	ALEX HURST
WR	BRANDON LaFELL*	CHRIS MITCHELL

DEFENSE

DE	PEP LEVINGSTON	CHASE CLEMENT
DT	CHARLES ALEXANDER*	AKIEM HICKS
DT	AL WOODS	DRAKE NEVIS
DE	RAHIM ALEM	CHANCEY AGHAYERE
LB	PERRY RILEY*	RYAN BAKER
LB	JACOB CUTRERA	KELVIN SHEPPARD*
LB	HARRY COLEMAN*	KELVIN SHEPPARD
CB	PATRICK PETERSON*	JAI EUGENE
SS	RON BROOKS	KARNELL HATCHER
FS	CHAD JONES	DANNY MCCRAY
CB	CHRIS HAWKINS*	BRANDON TAYLOR

SPECIAL TEAMS

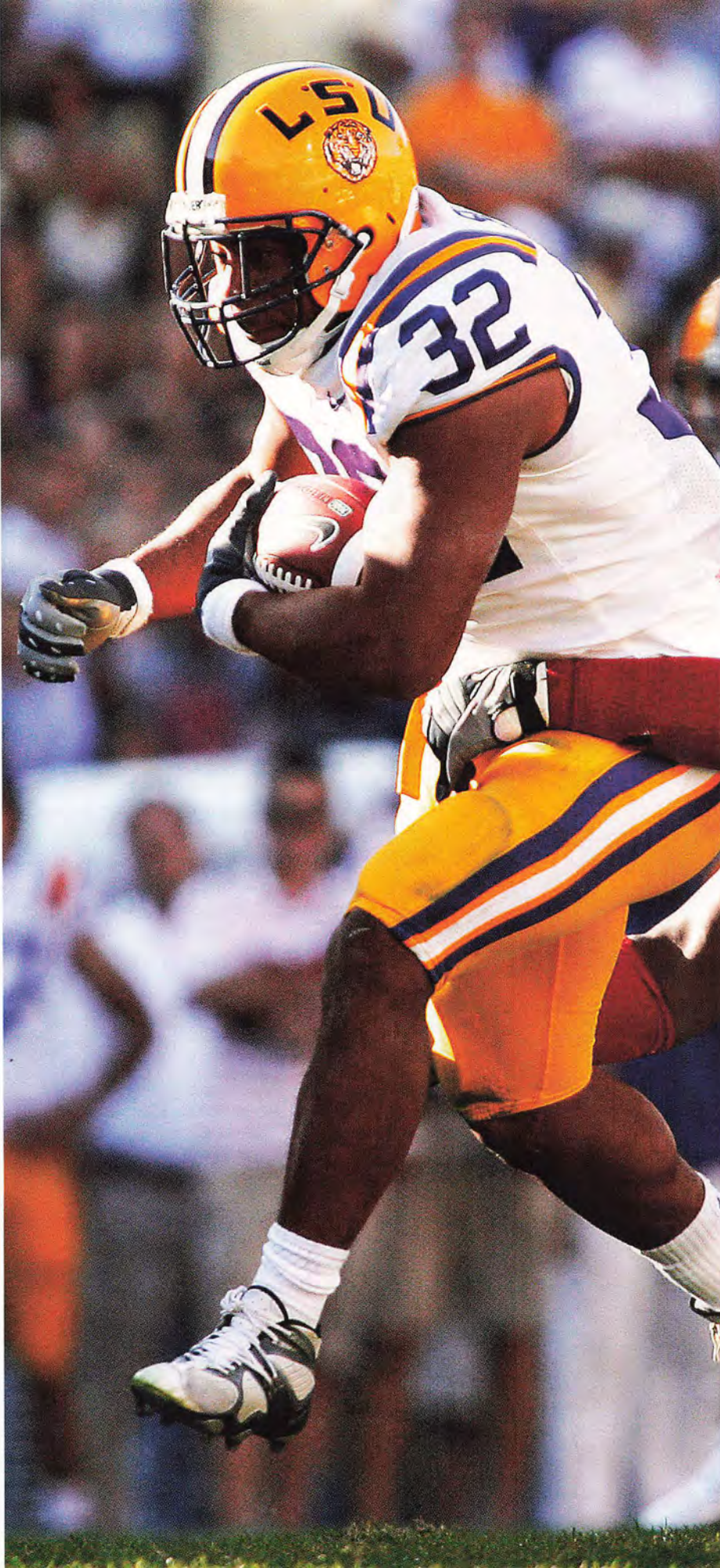
P	DEREK HELTON	JOSH JASPER
K	JOSH JASPER	DREW ALLEMAN
PR-KR	TRINDON HOLLIDAY*	CHAD JONES

*Returning starter

TELLING NUMBER

19

Consecutive nonconference games the Tigers have won since Les Miles took over the program, in 2005—the longest active FBS streak entering the '09 season.



Scott ranks sixth in LSU history with 28 career TDs, putting him within reach of the alltime record.

KEY RETURNEES

RB CHARLES SCOTT SENIOR

Scott rushed for more yards (1,174) last season than any returning SEC player. He also scored 18 TDs and averaged 5.4 yards a carry. Scott should have more room to run now that the passing game has been revamped.

OT CIRON BLACK SENIOR

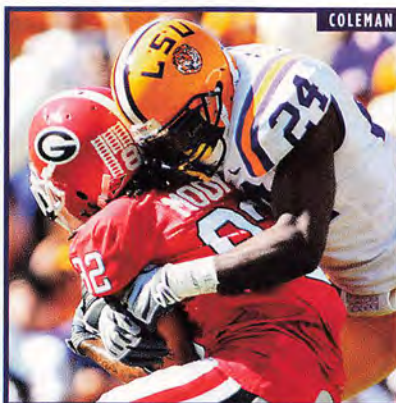
Black gives the Tigers an anchor and a leader on offense. If he stays healthy and the Tigers make the SEC title game and go to a bowl, Black would have 54 career starts, which would break the Division I-A record.

LB HARRY COLEMAN SENIOR

Coleman led the Tigers in tackles last season with 71 as a strong safety, but first-year defensive coordinator John Chavis moved Coleman to outside linebacker during spring practice. He is one of the hardest hitters on the team.

DE RAHIM ALEM SENIOR

The 6' 3", 254-pound Alem led the team and finished fourth in the SEC with eight sacks in 2008 despite starting only one game. He is a full-timer now, which doesn't bode well for SEC offensive tackles or quarterbacks.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

LB JACOB CUTRERA SENIOR

Has 91 career tackles in 36 games as a Tiger

IF HIS FIRST FEW STARTS IN A FILL-IN role are any indication, Cutrera should have no problem replacing Darryl Beckwith as the full-time starter at middle linebacker. In his first career start as a freshman, Cutrera led the Tigers with 11 tackles. In his two starts as a sophomore he intercepted a pass in one game and forced a fumble in another. Imagine how many big plays await now that Cutrera is an every-down player.

TOP RECRUIT

QB RUSSELL SHEPARD

Had 3,789 total yards and 48 touchdowns in '08

EVEN THOUGH THE 6' 1" 179-POUNDER from Houston's Cypress Ridge High probably won't beat out Jordan Jefferson for the starting quarterback job, LSU coaches will find a way to put the ball in Shepard's hands. Expect a package similar to the one the Gators used for Tim Tebow when he was a freshman at Florida, in 2006.

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

November 9, 1959



UNDER A CLEARING EVENING SKY a throng of 67,500 filled up the Tiger Stadium saucer on Saturday, Oct. 31, 1959. The LSU partisans' fundamental anti-Mississippi war cry—"Go to hell, Ole Miss"—rang out.

The first half was a nightmare for LSU. Three times the Tigers lost fumbles. On one of those, idolized All-America left halfback Billy Cannon [above] had a lapse that made possible a Mississippi score.

Early in the last quarter Cannon drifted back to field an Ole Miss punt. It was a beauty off the toe of Jake Gibbs, and it angled away from Cannon so that he could not quite catch it. The ball bounced neatly into Cannon's hands at the LSU 11-yard line, and the big fellow was away on the run of the year; the decade; or, if you are an LSU fan, the century. He was hit almost immediately, but he drove on. He was hit again and seemed certain to go down. He was hit solidly yet again as he ran the gantlet of tacklers. He did not appear to swerve from a path near the right sideline; he did not make fancy cuts or feints. He insisted under the punishment as a brave bull would under the picador's lance. He finally outran the pursuit near the LSU 40-yard line and fled on to score the touchdown of his life. He was given an ovation that could have been heard in Oxford and must have lasted for two minutes.

"That," said LSU coach Paul Dietzel, "was the greatest run I ever saw in football."

—Kenneth Rudeen

SI VAULT

For free access to all Tigers stories and photographs from the SI archives, go to SI.com/vault



A BIG MAN WITH A BIG HEART

The son of two ministers, tackle Ciron Black reached out to help a young LSU fan and learned something about himself in the process

LES MILES SURELY REJOICED IN JANUARY WHEN HE learned that offensive tackle Ciron Black, who has started 40 consecutive games for the Tigers, would return for his senior season. The LSU coach already had to replace center Brett Helms and left guard Herman Johnson, and Black's departure would have decimated the offensive line.

But no one celebrated that news more jubilantly than the Conger family of Prairieville, La., and none of the Congers cheered harder than nine-year-old Mikey.

In December 2007 Black, then a sophomore, and the Tigers were preparing to face Ohio State in the BCS title game while Mikey lay in a hospital bed in Memphis. A reaction to a chemotherapy treatment for acute lymphoblastic leukemia had left him extremely weak and unable to speak or see clearly. Knowing Mikey was an LSU football fan, some friends of the family sent messages to several LSU players to keep Mikey in their prayers. Black, the son of two ministers from Tyler, Texas, did more than pray.

After reading about Mikey's battle with cancer on the website CaringBridge.org, Black posted a message to Mikey's guest book on the site. He left his phone number in case Mikey ever wanted to call.

Mikey's mother, Laurina, remains convinced that a desire to watch the BCS game helped Mikey heal faster than anyone expected. "He knew that the LSU football team was getting ready to play that game," Laurina says. "That was a push. That was a real incentive for him to get well." So, too, was the care package that arrived from Baton Rouge. It contained the game ball Black had received for his role in the SEC championship game win against Tennessee, signed by the LSU team.

Black played a key role in the BCS championship game as well. He finished the season by

playing a school-record 1,031 snaps and allowing just one sack. Mikey watched the Tigers beat the Buckeyes from his hospital bed, and later that month he was able to return home.

When Mikey turned nine in July 2008, his parents took him to LSU to see the national title trophy. Tipped off that the Congers were visiting, Miles and Black greeted them with a birthday cake. Mikey, on his feet again, ran to Black and hugged him. The 325-pound lineman found himself wiping away tears. That fall Mikey and his father came to a game at Tiger Stadium. Black, in his third year as a starter, suddenly felt like a freshman playing his first game. "I don't think I've ever felt that nervous," Black says.

Black and the Congers have remained friends. He routinely texts Laurina to check on Mikey. Lately, the news has been good. A battery of tests in January found that Mikey's cancer was in remission. In early May, Laurina reported that Mikey was in school—just like any normal second-grader.

Black, meanwhile, worked all spring on the finer points of his game. After being named second-team All-SEC in '08, he would have been an early-round draft pick had he left school, but he felt he had more to accomplish. That includes earning the degree in communication studies he expects to receive in December. It also includes another national title, which Black would happily dedicate to the boy who inspires him every day. "I love him," Black says. "I'll be friends with him until the day I die." □

"I love him," says Black. "I'll be friends with [Mikey] until the day I die."



Miles (above) has surely appreciated Black's looming presence for LSU over the last three seasons. The 6' 5" tackle has started 40 games, but his most enduring legacy might be his friendship with Mikey (below), a cancer survivor who has inspired Black on the field and off.





MISSISSIPPI STATE

THE BULLDOGS KEYS FOR '09: THE SPREAD > NEW QB TYLER RUSSELL > JAMAR CHANEY RETURNS

READY TO LIGHT IT UP IN STARKVILLE

Will Dan Mullen's spread attack be enough to lift the Bulldogs out of the SEC's basement? He thinks it will | TEXT BY ADAM DUERSON

STARKVILLE, INDEED. CHANGE WAS THE grim reality hanging over the Mississippi State campus in 2008 as the 4-8 Bulldogs mustered a miserable 15.3 points per game, fourth worst in the nation. After a 45-0 season-ending loss to Ole Miss, coach Sylvester Croom said, "To say the least, I didn't see that one coming." Famous last words: Croom, who was 21-38 in five seasons, resigned under pressure less than 24 hours later.

To help turn the program around, the school lured Dan Mullen and his spread offense away from Florida, where he'd won two national titles in four years. At quarterback Mullen inherits senior Tyson Lee, an undersized (5' 10", 200 pounds) juco transfer who stepped in at midseason to lead the '08 team with 1,519 passing yards. But Tyler Russell, Rival.com's 12th-rated QB recruit, will be pushing for the job as a true freshman. "We're going to try to get him ready," says Mullen. "If he gives us the best opportunity, then heck, yes, he'll be playing."

Two of the Bulldogs' top five wideouts return, and Mullen wants as many as a dozen to be in the mix in '09. That helped land prized juco transfer Leon Berry (eight catches in the spring game) as well as freshman Chad Bumphis, who had 2,207 all-purpose yards and 23 TDs for Tupelo High in '08. MSU landed seven receivers in all and a top 25 class by most accounts.

To counterbalance the spread revolution—which comes with new uniforms, introduced in April—Mullen took a few old-school measures as well. A former player taught the team the Dog Pound Rock, a commotion of stomping and grunting made popular under former coach Jackie Sherrill, the last coach to lead the Bulldogs to a division title, in '98. Mullen wants a return to what he calls the Mississippi State way: great defense and ridiculous effort. The former should be helped by the return of senior linebacker Jamar Chaney, who missed most of the '08 season with a broken ankle, and the arrival of 6' 4", 270-pound run stopper Pernell McPhee, another junior college transfer.

But the team's fate rests on how well the Bulldogs adapt to Mullen's offense. In Starkville they hope this change will be a good one.

Lee (16) will take the lead in Mullen's new offense, but he'll be pushed by newcomer Russell.



2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Dan Mullen
(1st year)

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Les Koenning

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR:
Carl Torbush

2008 RECORD: 4-8
(2-6, T-4 SEC West)

FINAL AP RANK: NR

RETURNING STARTERS:
Offense 7, Defense 5

WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS:
3, 3, 3, 8, 4

2008 RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)

RUSHING OFFENSE: 105 (11)

PASSING OFFENSE: 94 (7)

TOTAL OFFENSE: 113 (10)

RUSHING DEFENSE: 73 (11)

PASSING DEFENSE: 17 (4)

TOTAL DEFENSE: 35 (10)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER

- 5 JACKSON STATE
- 12 at AUBURN
- 19 at VANDERBILT
- 26 LSU

OCTOBER

- 3 GEORGIA TECH
- 10 HOUSTON
- 17 at MTSU
- 24 FLORIDA
- 31 at KENTUCKY

NOVEMBER

- 14 ALABAMA
- 21 at ARKANSAS
- 28 MISSISSIPPI

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

The Bulldogs host six 2008 bowl teams, including Georgia Tech, which piled on 438 rushing yards in a 38-7 win in Atlanta, and Ole Miss, which shredded Mississippi State 45-0. The worst could come on Oct. 24 when Mullen hosts his former employer.

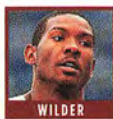
CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: SMITH DANIEL/CON SPIRIT; ROBERTO V. SOLIS/AP; WESTLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES

REPORT

THE BULLDOGS SEC WEST

2 MINUTE DRILL

DEPTH CHART



OFFENSE

QB	TYSON LEE*	TYLER RUSSELL
RB	ANTHONY DIXON*	CHRISTIAN DUCRÉ
WR	DELMON ROBINSON	TERRANCE DAVIS
TE	KENDRICK COOK	BRANDON HENDERSON
LT	DEREK SHERROD*	CHRIS SPENCER
LG	QUENTIN SAULSBERRY*	CRAIG JENKINS*
C	J.C. BRIGNONE*	D.J. LOONEY
RG	TOBIAS SMITH	MARK MELICHAR
RT	ADDISON LAWRENCE	PHILLIP FREEMAN
WR	BRANDON MCRAE*	LEON BERRY
WR	O'NEAL WILDER	CHARLES BAILEY

DEFENSE

DE	SEAN FERGUSON*	NICK BELL
DT	KYLE LOVE	CHARLES BURNS
DT	PERNELL MCPHEE	RODNEY PRINCE
DE	BRANDON COOPER	TREVOR STIGERS
LB	K.J. WRIGHT*	MICHAEL HUNT
LB	JAMAR CHANEY†	BO WALTERS
LB	CHRIS WHITE	KARLIN BROWN*
CB	MARCUS WASHINGTON*	COREY BROOMFIELD
SS	CHARLES MITCHELL	EMMANUEL GATLING
FS	ZACH SMITH	WADE BONNER
CB	DAMEIN ANDERSON	LOUIS WATSON

SPECIAL TEAMS

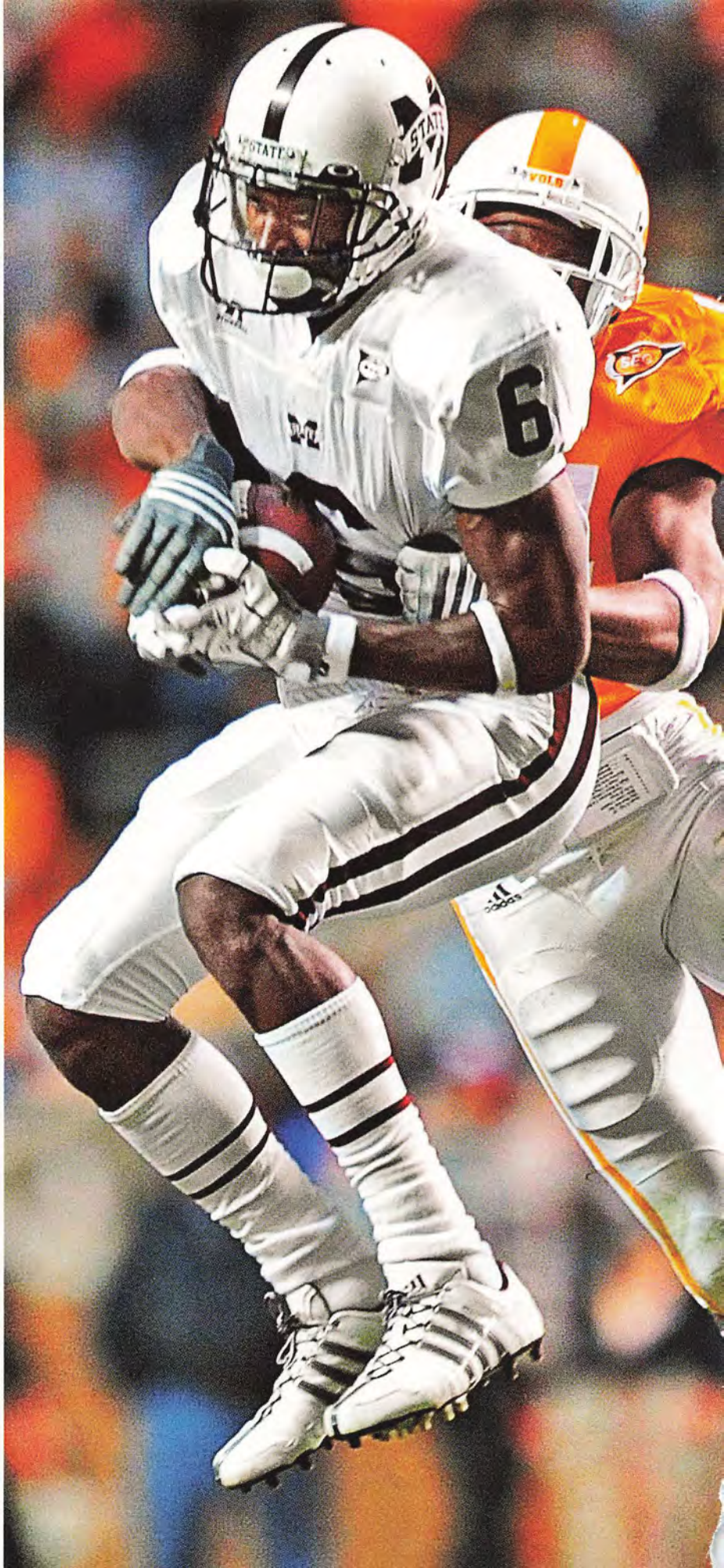
P	HEATH HUTCHINS	BAKER SWEDENBURG
K	SEAN BRAUCHLE	DEREK DEPASQUALE
PR-KR	LEON BERRY	DELMON ROBINSON

*Returning starter †Started last healthy season in '07

TELLING NUMBER

17.6

Average points per game scored by Mississippi State from 2001 through '08, for an average annual offensive ranking of 106th in the nation.



The Bulldogs' top returning WR, McRae had 518 receiving yards (10.2 yards per reception) in '08.

KEY RETURNEES

LB JAMAR CHANEY SENIOR

Chaney is a three-year starter who returns 12 months after breaking his ankle in the '08 opener. In '07, his last full campaign, he led all Bulldogs with 89 tackles, earning second-team All-SEC honors.

WR BRANDON MCRAE SENIOR

Another injury victim, McRae broke his right leg in the '08 finale but finished seventh in the SEC with 51 catches. He was still recovering in the spring, which gave him time to learn the new spread offense.

WR DELMON ROBINSON SOPHOMORE

While McRae studied and a slew of other injured wideouts sat idle, Robinson honed his spread skills in the spring. It paid off: The 5' 9" 180-pound speedster had five catches for 63 yards in the Maroon-White game.

RB ANTHONY DIXON SENIOR

The Bulldogs' alltime leader in rushing TDs will get every chance to match his 1,000-yard effort of '07, which would push him to No. 1 on the school's rushing list. Currently he trails Jerious Norwood by 619 yards.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

DL PERNELL MCPHEE JUNIOR

Juco transfer should bring the sack back to Starkville

AT 6' 4", 270 POUNDS, THIS ALL-AMERICA juco transfer is expected to inject some push into a line that has only one starter returning, who accounted for just one TFL last season. McPhee, who shunned offers from a handful of SEC schools as well as Michigan and West Virginia, comes to Starkville via Itawamba (Miss.) Community College, where he had a total of 33 sacks in his two seasons. Mississippi State had just 19 as a team in '08.

TOP RECRUIT

QB TYLER RUSSELL

Highly touted in-state QB should be in the mix

COACH DAN MULLEN SAYS HE WON'T BE redshirting anyone, which means Russell, one of the most promising QBs ever to land in Starkville, could be hurried into the huddle if a) incumbent Tyson Lee struggles early on, or b) Russell proves to be a quick learner. The 6' 4" Meridian recruit won a state title and Mississippi's Mr. Football in '08 while passing for 3,284 yards and 40 touchdowns.

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

November 10, 1980



ON NOV. 1, 1980, WHEN ALABAMA coach Paul (Bear) Bryant walked into the dressing room full of hysterical-beyond-bonkers football players to say a few words, the place fell silent. Bryant didn't ask for it; his presence demanded it. After all, the Legend was paying a call. "You are deserving of more than you got today," said Bryant. "You should have won by more."

These were ordinary words, something any coach might say to his players—except that Bear was standing in the Mississippi State University dressing room talking not to *his* boys but to the team that had just beaten his boys. Yes, Mississippi State. The Bulldogs had defeated the No. 1-ranked and seemingly invincible Crimson Tide before 50,891 spectators in Mississippi Memorial Stadium at Jackson. It was the largest college football crowd ever in Mississippi. Alabama hadn't been beaten since Sept. 23, 1978, when Southern California did it. The Tide had won 28 straight games, the longest streak in the nation. It was the first time in 22 years that Mississippi State had whipped 'Bama. Indeed, only three members of the State team were even alive when the last State victory over the Tide occurred.

Among the many State heroes was sophomore kicker Dana Moore, who scored all the winner's points with field goals of 37 and 22 yards. "It's sort of funny," he said, "knowing I'll never have a better moment in my life." He and a good many others. —Douglas S. Looney

SI VAULT

For free access to all Bulldogs stories and photographs from the SI archives, go to SI.com/vault

FROM FAR LEFT: MICHAEL STELL/GETTY IMAGES; MARVIN GENTRY/US PRESSWIRE; MISSISSIPPI STATE ATHLETICS; JIM BROWN/US PRESSWIRE; SHELBY DANIEL/ICON SM; DUSTY PERKINS



PROFILE

THE BULLDOGS ANTHONY DIXON, RB, SENIOR > JACKSON, MISS.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

A slimmer—and more focused—Anthony Dixon has embraced a new offense and is ready to continue his assault on MSU's record books

IN 2008 DAN MULLEN RAN FLORIDA'S SPREAD OFFENSE ALL THE way to a national championship with a stable of diminutive, slash-er-type running backs whose top three producers averaged 5' 10", 190 pounds. As the new head coach at Mississippi State, he inherits an entirely different type of runner in Anthony Dixon, who has rumbled to 2,603 yards in three seasons while weighing in at

250 pounds. And Mullen likes that just fine.

In February, one week after Mullen's wife, Megan, gave birth to a boy named Canon, Dixon popped by his coach's house, making him the first Bulldog to greet the newborn. Mullen invited the senior back to stay for family movie night, and then he filled up his most heralded returning player with cupcakes and potato chips.

In other words, Mullen's not pushing a Jenny Craig diet on the school's alltime rushing touch-down leader. Dixon knew he could stand to lose a bit of baby fat, so he shed 15 pounds this off-season by cutting out fried foods, candy bars and pizza buf-fets and eliminating the cookouts he used to host at his apartment. Mullen dis-agrees with the notion that

a guy of Dixon's stature doesn't have a place in the spread. At Florida, he says, "we used all sorts of small, fast guys, but that's because we never got a back like [Anthony] to come play for us." By contrast, he points to the pair of running backs, both weighing at least 210 pounds, who each ran for 800-plus yards while he was an as-sistant in the same offense at Utah, from 2003 to '04. "The bigger guys give an added dimen-sion between the tackles that maybe you didn't see from me last year. Anthony will fit in."

Yet life has been anything but cupcakes for Dixon since that February meeting. He admits to struggling with the no-huddle elements of Mul-len's offense when spring practice started. "I'm so used to the breaks you get with the huddle," he says. "No huddles means no breaks. That can be

"The bigger guys give an added dimension," says Mullen.

hard for a guy my size." To make matters worse, his weight ballooned slightly in March, leading Mullen to knock Dixon down to second—and, temporarily, third—on the depth chart.

In fact it wasn't until April, when seniors Christian Ducre and Arnil Stallworth and sophomore Robert Elliott all went down with a variety of injuries, that Dixon finally took to the new system and secured the starter's spot.

"Our other guys were really outperforming him before they got hurt," says Mullen. "Since then he's really bought in and learned how to run routes, catch, block and work pass-protect in the spread."

Mullen, who also won a BCS title with the Gators in '06, has tried to impress on Dixon the importance of giving full effort every day. "Being a champion is not a sometimes thing," the coach told him. A repeat of last season, when Dixon thrice followed up 100-yard games with lackluster sub-50-yard performances, won't cut it.

Dixon thrived in a less-crowded backfield this spring. He reclaimed his starter's spot with gutsy play in practice, including a 25-yard touchdown dash in which the senior hurdled a defender at the pylon. Two weeks later he started the Maroon-White game in front of a school-record 31,606 fans and rushed 11 times for 59 yards, including a two-yard score.

"I know I'm more skilled than some of the smaller backs you've seen in this offense," says Dixon. That's a big statement from a big back. Now it's time to prove it. □



Dixon enters the season as Mississippi State's alltime leader in rushing attempts (653) and rushing TDs (30), and the senior is just 619 yards shy of Jerious Norwood's career record of 3,222 yards. As a focal point of Mullen's new offense, he'll have every chance to set a new high mark.





MISSISSIPPI

THE REBELS KEYS FOR '09: REPLACING MICHAEL OHER > FINDING A PLAYMAKER ON DEFENSE

NO SNEAKING AROUND THIS TIME

Mississippi's climb up the ladder to success has not gone unnoticed by the teams the Rebels upset last season | TEXT BY CORY MCCARTNEY

IT TOOK OLE MISS FIVE SEASONS TO GET BACK to a bowl game, so with the Rebels becoming a trendy pick to win the SEC West after a surprising 2008—which included handing national champion Florida its only loss and wins at LSU and over Texas Tech in the Cotton Bowl—Houston Nutt felt it necessary to deliver a dose of reality.

He told his players, “Before last year you hadn’t won an SEC game [since 2006], so there was very little respect for you. Now you can’t sneak into the Swamp, you can’t sneak into Death Valley and beat a Florida or an LSU. You’re on the radar, and how hard are you working?”

The Rebels certainly won’t be able to sneak up on anyone, but with 14 starters returning, they shouldn’t have to rely on the element of surprise. Junior quarterback Jevan Snead (page 82), who passed for 2,762 yards and 26 touchdowns last season, leads an offense that averaged 45.5 points in the final four games of ’08. He has plenty of explosiveness at his disposal with do-everything player Dexter McCluster (1,280 all-purpose yards and seven scores) and senior receiver Shay Hodge (44 receptions for 725 yards and eight TDs). The top five rushers return, led by McCluster (655 yards) and senior Cordera Eason (647).

But for the offense to live up to its potential, the Rebels have to overcome the loss of three linemen, including All-America left tackle and first-round NFL draft pick Michael Oher. The job of protecting Snead’s blind side goes to redshirt freshman Bradley Sowell (6’ 7”, 310 pounds), who impressed the coaches with a strong performance this spring.

Defensively, eight starters are returning from a group that gave up 85.5 rushing yards per game (fourth best in the nation) and allowed just 19. The line, led by senior end Greg Hardy (8½ sacks in ’08), has plenty of experience, but another proven playmaker is needed, and that person could be junior Jerrell Powe, who is vying to replace first-round pick Peria Jerry at nosetackle.

The biggest question surrounding these Rebels is how they will handle being favored to win their first division title since ’03. “[What] we try to put in our guys is we have to play at a very high level,” says Nutt, “because there are a lot of eyes on you.”

In year one Nutt (below) ruled the Cotton Bowl (left) and sacked Mississippi State (bottom).



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ALBERT PENACON; BRAD SCHLOSSER/SHUT; BRUCE NEWMAN/OXFORD BALE

2 MINUTE DRILL

VITALS

COACH: Houston Nutt (2nd year) 9-4 (5-3 in SEC)

OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR: Kent Austin

DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR: Tyrone Nix

2008 RECORD: 9-4 (5-3, 2nd SEC West)

FINAL AP RANK: 14

RETURNING STARTERS: Offense 6, Defense 8

WINS OVER THE LAST FIVE SEASONS: 4, 3, 4, 3, 9

2008 RANKINGS: FBS (SEC)

RUSHING OFFENSE: 28 (2)

PASSING OFFENSE: 53 (4)

TOTAL OFFENSE: 29 (3)

RUSHING DEFENSE: 4 (2)

PASSING DEFENSE: T-81 (12)

TOTAL DEFENSE: 19 (5)

2009 SCHEDULE

SEPTEMBER

- 6 at MEMPHIS
- 19 SOUTHEASTERN LA.
- 24 at SOUTH CAROLINA

OCTOBER

- 3 at VANDERBILT
- 10 ALABAMA
- 17 UAB
- 24 ARKANSAS
- 31 at AUBURN

NOVEMBER

- 7 NORTHERN ARIZONA
- 14 TENNESSEE
- 21 LSU
- 28 at MISSISSIPPI STATE

SCHEDULE ANALYSIS

Ole Miss should breeze through the nonconference slate and will face its biggest SEC tests (Alabama, Tennessee and LSU) at home. Plus, there's no Florida—though with this schedule the Rebels may run into the Gators at the SEC title game.

REPORT

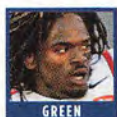
THE REBELS SEC WEST

2 MINUTE DRILL

DEPTH CHART



SCOTT



GREEN



VAUGHN

OFFENSE

QB	JEVAN SNEAD*	NATHAN STANLEY
RB	BRANDON BOLDEN	CORDERA EASON*
FB	ANDY HARTMANN	DERRICK DAVIS
SE	SHAY HODGE*	MARKETH SUMMERS
LT	BRADLEY SOWELL	ALEX WASHINGTON
LG	REID NEELY	BRANDON GREEN
C	DAVERIN GERALDS*	MARK JEAN-LOUIS
RG	RISHAW JOHNSON	A.J. HAWKINS
RT	JOHN JERRY*	LOGAN CLAIR
TE	GERALD HARRIS*	FERBIA ALLEN
FL	DEXTER MCCLUSTER	LIONEL BREAUX

DEFENSE

DE	MARCUS TILLMAN*	EMMANUEL STEPHENS
DT	TED LAURENT*	JERRELL POWE
DT	LAWON SCOTT	LaMARK ARMOUR
DE	GREG HARDY	KENTRELL LOCKETT*
LB	PATRICK TRAHAN	BRANDON SANDERS
LB	JONATHAN CORNELL*	JASON JONES
LB	ALLEN WALKER*	LAMAR BRUMFIELD
CB	MARSHAY GREEN*	JEREMY MCGEE
SS	JOHNNY BROWN	DERRICK HERMAN
FS	KENDRICK LEWIS*	FON INGRAM
CB	CASSIUS VAUGHN*	MARCUS TEMPLE

SPECIAL TEAMS

P	JUSTIN SPARKS*	BRYAN POWERS
K	JOSHUA SHENE*	BRYSON ROSE
PR	MARSHAY GREEN	KR BRANDON BOLDEN

*Returning starter

TELLING NUMBER

6

Years since the Rebels played in back-to-back bowls, dating to their wins in 2002 and '03.



Shene's field goal beat Arkansas 23-21 in 2008. His team-high 103 points was fifth best in the SEC.

KEY RETURNEES

QB JEVAN SNEAD JUNIOR

Snead is the SEC's top returning passer after throwing for 2,762 yards and 26 touchdowns as a first-year starter. After shaking off the rust from his layoff (page 82), the transfer completed 65.7% of his passes for an average of 259.7 yards in the final three games.

FL DEXTER McCLUSTER SENIOR

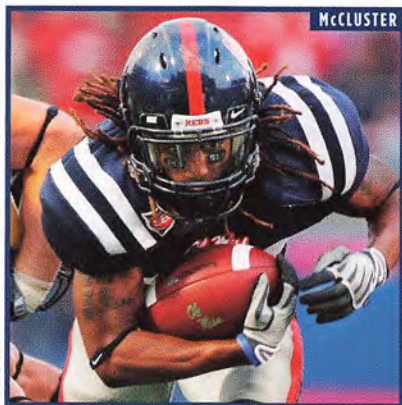
With Percy Harvin in the NFL, the SEC's best all-purpose weapon might be McCluster, who averaged 8.4 yards per touch in totaling 655 yards rushing, 625 receiving and seven touchdowns in the Wild Rebel formation.

DE GREG HARDY SENIOR

Hardy's decision to put off the pros gives the Rebels arguably the SEC's best pass rusher. Despite missing five games and being limited in others after foot surgery, Hardy had 8½ sacks, the third most in the conference in '08.

K JOSHUA SHENE SENIOR

The All-SEC first-teamer is the conference's active leader with 42 field goals. He hit 81% of his attempts last season (17 of 21) and was 52 of 52 on point after attempts.



BREAKOUT PLAYER

RB BRANDON BOLDEN SOPHOMORE

Made 10 receptions and completed a 37-yard pass

THE 5' 11", 220-POUND SOPHOMORE HAD just 441 yards in his first 12 games, including 10 in which he had less than 50 yards. But he opened eyes with 101 yards on 11 carries, including a 17-yard touchdown run, in the Cotton Bowl win over Texas Tech. This spring Bolden built on that bowl performance to further solidify himself as the No. 1 option in a crowded backfield.

TOP RECRUIT

OT BOBBY MASSIE

Prep coach says he "could start in the NFL right now"

THE HULKING 6' 7" 345-POUNDER, WHO spurned Alabama for the Rebels, was the nation's top-ranked prep player coming out of Hargrave Military Academy and is the long-term solution to replacing Michael Oher. Once he learns the playbook, he could push Bradley Sowell for playing time at left tackle or be used elsewhere on a revamped line.

SI VAULT

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

November 12, 2001



LITTLE DID THE YOUNGER FANS realize, as they sat in Mississippi's Vaught-Hemingway Stadium on Nov. 3, 2001, cupping both hands around their open mouths, cheering on one play and gasping on the next, that Eli Manning [above] was taking them back in time. This is how it was in his daddy's day. Except Daddy didn't work overtime.

Eli's father is Archie Manning, who was a scrambler and a gambler when he was Mississippi's quarterback more than 30 years ago. Archie's youngest son upheld the family's good name under extraordinary circumstances, throwing for 312 yards and six touchdowns and rallying his team to five second-half and overtime comebacks before Mississippi finally lost to Arkansas 58-56 in a game that lasted four hours and 14 minutes and went seven overtimes—the most in college history.

In this game, Arkansas's ever-shifting defenses stifled the sophomore for the first three quarters. In typical Manning fashion he figured them out by the fourth. Unfortunately for the Rebels, the Razorbacks came alive in the same quarter.

The game finally ended when the Rebels failed on a conversion attempt: Eli's roommate, tight end Doug Zeigler, was stopped a yard short of the end zone. "It's the strangest game I ever played in," Eli said.

How many times did people walk away from his father's games saying the same thing?

—Ian Thomsen

SI VAULT

For free access to all Rebels stories and photographs from the SI archives, go to SI.com/vault



FROM OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Pushed out of the spotlight by Florida's Tim Tebow and Texas's Colt McCoy, the Rebels quarterback is looking like a star in Oxford

JEVAN SNEAD HAS OFTEN BEEN OVERSHADOWED ON THE field. First there was Matthew Stafford, future Georgia star and No. 1 pick in the NFL draft, who bounced Snead out of the Texas Class 4A state semifinals when Stafford was at Highland Park High School and Snead was at Stephenville. Then there was Tim Tebow, the Heisman-winner-to-be,

whom Florida recruited despite already having, and subsequently losing, Snead's commitment. And finally there was Colt McCoy, who beat out a freshman Snead for Texas's starting job in 2006 and became a star-in-the-making as Snead spent most of the season on the bench.

The stars have finally aligned for Snead, who transferred to Ole Miss in January 2007. The junior is generating Heisman buzz of his own after headlining the Rebels' turnaround from 3-9 in '07 to 9-4 last season. But the 6' 3", 215-pound Texas native isn't one to get too worked up over polls, praise—or anything else for that matter.

When Snead threw 11 interceptions through the first eight games of '08, he didn't lose his cool. When he turned it around and passed for 779 yards and nine touchdowns in the final three games, including a Cotton Bowl win over Texas Tech, he was the same old Jevan. "His demeanor didn't change from the first of the season until the end," coach Houston Nutt says. "But you could tell where he grew up is the maturity and taking charge in huddle, making things happen."

Snead didn't get caught up in the highs or lows because he knew he had to keep things in perspective, having not played since he made eight appearances, passing in just five of those, as a Longhorns freshman. "I think part of [my slow start] was due to my lack of experience," he says. "You have to grow as a quarterback,

and you should be playing better at the end of the season."

The way he played at the end of the season has the Rebels faithful believing Snead could finally revive a position that's been nondescript in Oxford since Eli Manning roamed Vaught-Hemingway Stadium. It's only fitting then that Ole Miss's first family of quarterbacks reached out to Snead, welcoming him to coach high schoolers at the Manning Passing Academy in

Thibodaux, La. Snead used the opportunity to pick the brains of former Rebels stars Archie and Eli.

"They stress how much hard work it takes to be a quarterback on a winning team and how much time it takes to be great," Snead says.

"That's one thing I took from

it. There's always more work that can be done, and you can always improve."

During spring camp Nutt says he could see how much Snead had improved his decision-making and understanding of the offense, so much so that he's giving his signal-caller the freedom to change plays before the snap to exploit defenses. "We put a lot on the quarterback, and he's really handled it," Nutt said.

Snead could well put himself in the same orbit as McCoy and Tebow once again this season, joining the two in the Heisman race. But his thoughts are elsewhere. "Being able to get out on the field and help our team has been one of those things I've been waiting for for a long time," says the ever humble Snead.

Fortunately for Rebels fans, the wait is over. □

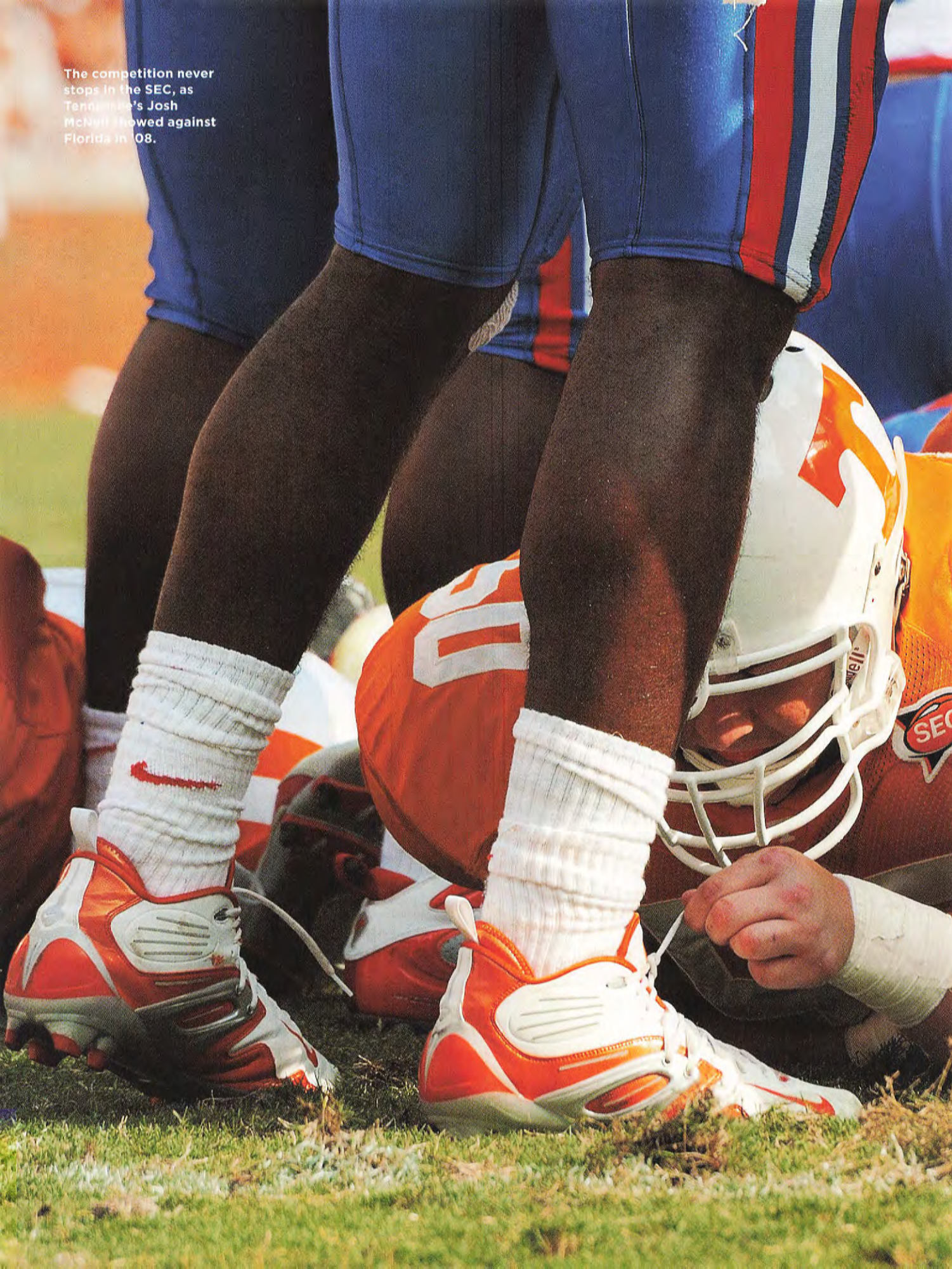
Nutt has given Snead the freedom to change plays before the snap.



Enlightened by the Mannings about the benefits of hard work and given the opportunity to play and lead by Nutt (above), Snead produced a 31-30 upset of Florida in Gainesville and a 31-13 win over LSU in the Magnolia Bowl (below) and has stirred up expectations of a Heisman-caliber season.



The competition never stops in the SEC, as Tennessee's Josh McNeill showed against Florida in '08.



THE TRADITIONS > THE PLAYERS > THE HISTORY

THE LIFE



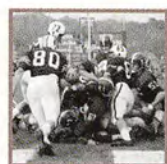
FANS ARE COMIN' TO YOUR CITY

86 | If you're planning to go on the road for an SEC football game this season, don't miss the hottest spots at every school



BETTING ON THE HOUSE

88 | SEC territory is teeming with recruiting talent, and the coaches who keep their state's top players have the best path to success



THE BEST OF ENEMIES

94 | Deep in the beating, often bleeding, heart of SEC football, winning isn't everything—winning against that certain someone is

TRAVEL GUIDE

ROAD TRIP | SIGHTS > SOUNDS > SPIRITS

FANS ARE COMIN' TO YOUR CITY

If you're planning to go on the road for an SEC football game this season, don't miss these hot spots | BY ANDY STAPLES

FROM TOOMER'S CORNER AT AUBURN TO THE Grove at Ole Miss, the pre- and postgame activities in the South are just as important as the games. For those traveling through SEC country this season, here are the best things to do and the best places to go to put some South in your mouth.



ALABAMA

NO ONE TAKES THEIR football more seriously than Crimson Tide fans. Sorority sisters probably know the names of every prospect in Alabama's next recruiting class. If you don't get chills when the voice of Bear Bryant growls, "This is Alabama football," during pregame festivities at Bryant-Denny Stadium, you aren't a college football fan.

DON'T MISS > THE BRYANT MUSEUM

The on-campus museum features a replica of the legendary coach's office. Alas, Bryant's favorite Golden Flake potato chips are sold separately.

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > ARCHIBALD'S

Tuscaloosa is home to two of the world's finest rib joints. The original Dreamland (sauce, above), off Jug Factory Road, gets more publicity, but insiders swear by the pork ribs at Archibald's, a six-seat counter just across the Black Warrior River from campus, in Northport.



ARKANSAS

RAZORBACKS FANS DON'T hesitate to make themselves heard. Several times a game, they "call the hogs" with a multidirectional cheer that can be heard for miles. "Woo! Pig! Sooy!" Emphasis on the "Woooooooooooo!"

DON'T MISS > THE PIG SCREEN

The 107-by-30-foot video board at Reynolds Razorback Stadium is one of the most impressive digital screens in college football.

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > DOE'S EAT PLACE

Bring your appetite. Doe's features a two-pound rib eye, a three-pound T-bone and a sirloin that runs three to four pounds and feeds a family.

AUBURN

THEY DON'T CALL IT THE LOVELIEST village on the Plains for nothing. If you cheer



for any school besides Alabama, you'll find Auburn fans the most courteous hosts in the SEC. Carloads of visitors are greeted with "War Eagle, y'all." Opponents receive a less civil greeting inside the confines of Jordan-Hare Stadium, which is one of the loudest in the nation.

DON'T MISS > TOOMER'S DRUGS

On one corner of the intersection of College Street and Magnolia Avenue is the university. On the opposite is Toomer's Drugs, a drugstore and soda fountain that has served perfect lemonade since John Heisman coached the Tigers in the 1890s. After wins, Auburn fans "roll" Toomer's Corner (above), tossing toilet paper into the trees.

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > MOMMA GOLDBERG'S DELI

Man cannot subsist on lemonade alone. The best bet is the Momma's Love sandwich, a combo of roast beef, ham, turkey and Muenster cheese on a hoagie bun.



FLORIDA

FLORIDA FIELD, BETTER known as the Swamp, is exactly what the name implies—a hot, humid den

suitable only for the native Gators. Seats are closer to the field than at any other SEC venue, and the stands seem to go straight up. Cram 90,000 people into a space fit for 75,000, and a cheer sounds like the roar of a jet engine. Between the third and fourth quarters, fans sing *We Are the Boys of Old Florida*.

DON'T MISS > LAKE ALICE

Before diving into the frenzy in the Swamp, enjoy a few quiet moments on the southwest corner of campus. Just don't touch the alligators. They're real.

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > SATCHEL'S PIZZA

Head to lunch at Satchel's in northeast Gainesville. Each monster-sized (18-inch diameter) pie takes about 45 minutes to cook, so tide yourself over with a salad featuring Satchel's own secret vinaigrette recipe.



FAYETTEVILLE



OXFORD

STARKVILLE



BATON ROUGE



GEORGIA

OTHER SEC SCHOOLS have shrubbery, but Georgia's original privet hedges—which encircle the Sanford

Stadium field—were planted when the stadium opened in 1929. They were removed briefly so the stadium could host soccer games during the 1996 Olympics, but they were quickly replanted.

DON'T MISS > LIVE MUSIC

Check the concert listings. You might just catch the next band to follow in the footsteps of the B-52s (above), R.E.M. and Widespread Panic, all from Athens.

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > THE TACO STAND

There are three locations in Athens, including one across from the UGA Arch. Make friends with the locals and order the Herschel, a burrito featuring a sun-dried tomato tortilla, pulled pork or chicken, chipotle barbecue sauce, black beans and red cabbage slaw.



KENTUCKY

SURE, IT'S A BASKETBALL school, but the folks in Lexington know that a football game is a great excuse to throw a party. Make sure to practice corn-hole, a beanbag toss game that is a staple of the tailgating culture in the Bluegrass state.



of the SEC. He is buried at St. Peter's Cemetery.

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > AJAX DINER

Head to the Square, a collection of restaurants, bars and shops, to satisfy your eating and drinking needs. A highlight is the country-fried steak at Ajax.



SOUTH CAROLINA

IF YOU KNOW THE RIGHT people in Columbia, you may be able to talk your way into a Cockaboos (above), one of 22 retired railroad cabooses turned tailgating strongholds on the south side of Williams-Brice Stadium.

DON'T MISS > ALSO SPRACH ZARATHRUSTRA

The horn-heavy theme to Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey serves as the introduction for the Gamecocks, and it never fails to get the fans roaring.

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > BOJANGLES

The Charlotte-based chain that's known for fine fried chicken, biscuits and sweet tea is right across from the stadium. For more refined fare, head downtown to California Dreaming. Order anything on the menu, but ask for extra croissants.



TENNESSEE

FEW SEC VENUES CAN match Tennessee for sheer natural beauty. The Smoky Mountains provide the backdrop, and Neyland Stadium sits on a bend in the Tennessee River. The river provides the highway for the Vol Navy (above), a group of Tennessee fans who travel to the game by boat.

DON'T MISS > PRIDE OF THE SOUTHLAND BAND

The band will try to fake you out, forming several variations of its favorite letter before settling into a simple T that stretches up from the home-locker-room tunnel to the 50-yard line and across the width of the field. When the T parts, it's time to play football.

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > CALHOUN'S

This barbecue joint serves some of the SEC's best baby back ribs. Tell your server to skip the garlic rolls and bring more buttermilk biscuits. If Calhoun's is too crowded, a distinct possibility, head a few miles north on Broadway and eat a burger at Litton's.



VANDERBILT

VANDERBILT STADIUM is ideal for visitors. It's a short walk from a number of hotels, bars and restaurants, and the high probability of a day game leaves plenty of time for bar-hopping Saturday night.

DON'T MISS > RYMAN AUDITORIUM

This downtown live music venue, less than a half mile west of Vandy's campus, is known as the Mother Church of Country Music. Opened in 1892, Ryman has been the site for performances from everyone from Elvis to James Brown to Dolly Parton to Taylor Swift (above).

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > ROTIER'S

Order cheeseburgers on French bread. Even though milk shakes aren't on the menu, ask for one anyway.

DON'T MISS > RACING AT KEENELAND

If your team will play in Lexington in October, go early and take in a day of horse racing at Keeneland. Even in general admission, dress to impress.

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > BILLY'S BAR-B-Q

Head to Billy's on Cochran Road and order the Mexican corn bread and a cup of Kentucky Burgoo, a traditional meat and vegetable stew.



LSU

TIGER STADIUM IS ONE OF the most terrifying venues in college football. Mike VI (left), LSU's Bengal tiger mascot, is caged on game day near the tunnel leading out of the visitor's locker room. The fans are equally ferocious; LSU backers crank up the decibels to ear-splitting levels.

DON'T MISS > THE TAILGATERS

Some fans at LSU have gone so far as to hire tailgating coordinators to create elaborate spreads. Others are content to make magic with their hibachis, deep fryers and crawfish pots.

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > MIKE ANDERSON'S

If a food item can be stuffed with crabmeat, this seafood and Cajun joint has stuffed it.

MISSISSIPPI STATE

MISSISSIPPI STATE FANS HAVE CLANGED the bells for more than 50 years—in spite of the fact that the SEC banned "artificial noisemakers"

at games in 1974. According to local legend a Jersey cow wandered onto the field shortly before a resounding win against Ole Miss. Students adopted the cow—and its bell—as a good luck charm, and the rest is history.

DON'T MISS > JOHNNY CASH FLOWER PICKIN' FESTIVAL

Florida fans coming for the Oct. 24 game at Scott Field may want to show up a week early and catch this festival, which offers an annual pardon to the musician, who was arrested for public drunkenness in Starkville on May 11, 1965, and memorialized the event in the song *Starkville City Jail*.

IF YOU'RE HUNGRY > THE LITTLE DOOEY

Head to this barbecue joint and order a Shocker Plate with pulled pork, turnip greens and fried okra. You'll love it.



MISSISSIPPI

WHERE ELSE BUT AT THE Grove (left) can you eat a pimento cheese sandwich on fine china? Ole Miss fans aren't kidding when they boast that while they may not win every game, they've never lost a party.

DON'T MISS > WILLIAM FAULKNER

Pay your respects to Faulkner, the unofficial author



RECRUITS

STAYING HOME

THE NUMBERS > 47.4 % OF SEC-BRED PLAYERS STAY IN THE CONFERENCE

BETTING ON THE HOUSE

SEC territory is teeming with recruiting talent, and the coaches who keep their state's top players have the best path to success | BY ANDY STAPLES

FIRST-YEAR TENNESSEE COACH LANE KIFFIN SPENT MUCH of the off-season making headlines on purpose. While most of the stories cast Kiffin in a poor light, they accomplished the 34-year-old's goal of making Tennessee the nation's most talked-about program. So why did Kiffin believe the Volunteers needed publicity at any cost? *¶ Geography. ¶* "We're not fortunate enough to just sign 23

of 25 players from our state and get it done," Kiffin says. He understands that just as in real estate, the three most important factors in recruiting are location, location and location. The Volunteers aspire to compete every season for the championship in a conference whose nine states produce a third of the nation's BCS-conference signees despite having just 19.1% of the nation's population (chart, page 90).

Unfortunately for Kiffin, his state—which he shares with conference rival Vanderbilt—is not a top producer. Tennessee ranked No. 17 in the country, with 176 signees from 2004 to '09. Florida, home of the defending national champion Gators, led the nation with 1,186 signees.

So for Tennessee to compete with Florida, Georgia, Alabama, LSU and the other programs sitting atop gold mines, Kiffin feels he must make his program a household name far beyond the Volunteer State's borders. "This one, as I looked at it, needed to have a spark immediately as far as national exposure," he says. "It's a program that has had great coaches and great players over many years, but the way recruiting is nowadays, you can't go out and sign 50 guys. We've got to be able to have kids around the country—and I'm talking about kids in middle school—seeing Tennessee, seeing our logo, seeing our colors, seeing our players, being familiar with our staff."

Kiffin already knew what a trio of economists discovered in '04 when they designed a model

The nine SEC states produce a third of the nation's BCS signees.

to predict the college choices of blue-chip recruits with startling accuracy. The model created by Mike DuMond, Allen Lynch and Jennifer Platania—rabid college football fans who met as Ph.D. candidates at Florida State—found that among players considering only BCS-conference schools, distance from home was the most important factor in a recruit's choice. (The model

was published in the February 2008 issue of *The Journal of Sports Economics*.)

The model showed that a school's academic standing—whether it's in the top 50 of the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings—provides only a minuscule bump. The same goes for the school's final poll

ranking for the previous season. What didn't matter to players shocked the economists more. According to the data, the athletes weren't, on the whole, worried about the depth chart, how many national titles a school had won or how many players it sent to the NFL. "Recruits tend to have short memories," says DuMond, who is an economist for CRA International, a consulting firm in Tallahassee, Fla. In general, he says, the top recruits are looking for "a place that is in a BCS conference with a big stadium that is close enough that they can be seen by family and friends."

That explains why Kiffin must work harder than some of his rivals to win the hearts—and signatures—of recruits. It also helps explain why SEC teams have won the past three BCS titles and four of the past six.

FERTILE GROUND



THE NINE STATES THAT MAKE UP THE SEC PRODUCED 33.9% OF THE NATION'S BCS conference signees from 2004 to '09. Of the 3,061 signees who attended high school in SEC country, 1,450 (47.4%) went to SEC schools. Of the 1,787 players overall who signed with SEC schools, only 18.9% came from outside the region.

STATE	BCS-CONFERENCE SIGNEES PRODUCED	NATIONAL RANK	SEC SIGNEES	PERCENTAGE
Alabama	285	7	211	74%
Arkansas	100	25	83	83%
Florida	1,186	1	297	25%
Georgia	587	4	289	49.2%
Kentucky	103	24	53	51.5%
Louisiana	221	12	141	63.8%
Mississippi	186	14	159	85.5%
South Carolina	217	13	93	42.9%
Tennessee	176	17	124	70.5%



WR | RUEBEN RANDLE LSU It was a classic signing-day soap opera. Called "the most sought-after athlete in the state of Louisiana" by Tigers coach Les Miles, Randle picked LSU over Oklahoma and Alabama after the Tigers withdrew a commitment to former Parade All-America receiver (and Randle's high school teammate) DeAngelo Benton.



SEC: THE LIFE RECRUITS

Over the last six years, the league's nine states produced 3,061 BCS-conference signees, or 33.9% of the national total. Six SEC states (Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, South Carolina and Mississippi) ranked in the top 15 in talent production. Given the economists' findings, it's safe to assume that the nearby SEC schools—along with the ACC or Big East schools that share those states—have an edge in recruiting players coveted by schools across the nation. The win totals back up that hypothesis.

An SI study of recruiting data for the six BCS conferences and Notre Dame found that of the nine schools that won 50 or more games from 2004 to '08, seven signed more than half of their recruits from within their state or from within 200 miles of campus: Texas (94.2% from in-state, 73.8% from within 200 miles), USC (73.0, 60.0), Georgia (64.5, 71.0), Florida (62.4, 47.9), Ohio State (56.8, 66.3), Virginia Tech (55.2, 44.0) and LSU (51.3, 56.5). Oklahoma barely missed the cut, with exactly 50% from within 200 miles. Of the 22 schools that won 40 or more games during that span, 16 attracted more than half of their players from within 200 miles or from within their state. Of the 44 schools that won fewer than 40 games, only 13 met the homegrown-recruiting criteria. For example, Tennessee (38 wins) signed 31.9% of its players from in state and 36.2% from within 200 miles from 2004–09.

Florida State offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Jimbo Fisher—spoiled by a recruiting advantage while serving in the same roles at LSU from 2000–06—cited geography as a major reason for his decision to remain as the Seminoles' No. 2 coach behind Bobby Bowden rather than pursue an opportunity to become

head coach at West Virginia, in his home state. "That's one of the things that made this job [at FSU] so attractive to me," Fisher says. "You have to have a recruiting base. You'll have up-and-down years, but to win consistently, you have to be able to do that."

Pete Carroll used a similar philosophy to rebuild the program at USC. When Carroll arrived in 2000, the Trojans had gone 31-29 the previous five seasons. Carroll and his assistants tirelessly blanketed the state to increase awareness of the program. After a 6-6 record in '01, Carroll & Co. have gone 82-9.

"We have such a fertile area here in Southern California in particular, that recruiting here is critical," Carroll says. "You want to own the great players in your state, and then you do what you can outside the state. Without that I think you're missing the point. So we've always focused with the greatest emphasis here at home."

Florida's Urban Meyer, who is 44-9 with two national titles in four years in Gainesville, agrees. "It's night and day," Meyer says of recruiting from a hotbed state versus one that produces fewer players. But the Sunshine State has its own unique dynamic. It produces the most players of any state in the nation, but four BCS-conference schools call Florida home. Of those, three (Florida, Florida State and Miami) have won a national title in the past 10 years. (The fourth is South Florida.) "The hardest thing we have is that there are other schools in the state," Meyer says. "In some places that's the only show in town."

In Louisiana, that's LSU. The Tigers own a state that produced 221 signees between 2004 and '09. Of those, 72 signed with LSU. Most of the others weren't even recruited by the Tigers. Georgia dominates the talent-rich Peach State as well, despite the presence of rival Georgia Tech in Atlanta. The state of

Georgia ranked No. 4 in the nation with 587 signees between 2004 and '09, and the Bulldogs got 79 of those players.

State loyalty sometimes supersedes straight-line distance. "If I'm a recruit in south Georgia, and it's 200 miles to Gainesville and 200 miles to Athens, the physical distance is the same either way," DuMond says. "Georgia still has an advantage because I live in that state."

The sheer depth of homegrown talent has made the SEC the envy of college football and has allowed some programs to become superpowers. Schools can keep 85 players on scholarship at any given time, and NCAA rules allow them to bring in a maximum of 25 new scholarship players a year. Most schools sign 20 to

25 a year, meaning a state would need to produce at least 100 players in a five-year period to properly stock one program. Taking the total signees produced from 2004 through '08 and dividing by the number of BCS schools in each state shows that in the SEC, Alabama, Auburn, Florida, Georgia and LSU could fill their rosters entirely with BCS-quality players from their own states while still leaving enough for any fellow BCS state schools to stock their rosters as well. Not coincidentally, those are the five winningest programs in the SEC during the past five seasons. During that time, those programs have won every SEC title, all but three division titles, three national titles and had an undefeated season (Auburn in '04).



RB | BRYCE BROWN TENNESSEE After the Wichita, Kans., native waffled on an oral commitment to play at Miami, the ever-ready Kiffin leaped into the mix to land the nation's No. 1 recruit. When Brown attended a Tennessee spring practice in March, approximately 2,000 fans chanted his name, helping to keep Brown from drifting toward his second choice, Kansas State.

HOMEBODIES



OF THE 25 HIGHEST-RANKED '09 RECRUITS WHO CAME FROM ONE OF the nine SEC states, 17 signed with schools in the conference. Of the eight who did not, only three left their home states. (Source: Rivals.com.)

NAME	POSITION	RIVALS.COM NATIONAL RANK	HOMETOWN	SCHOOL
1. Rueben Randle	WR	2	Bastrop, La.	LSU
2. D.J. Fluker	OT	3	Foley, Ala.	Alabama
3. Trent Richardson	RB	6	Pensacola, Fla.	Alabama
4. Dre Kirkpatrick	DB	11	Gadsden, Ala.	Alabama
5. Ray Ray Armstrong	ATH	13	Sanford, Fla.	Miami
6. Jacobbi McDaniel	DT	15	Greenville, Fla.	Florida State
7. Janzen Jackson	DB	17	Lake Charles, La.	Tennessee
8. Andre Debose	WR	21	Sanford, Fla.	Florida
9. Gary Brown	DT	23	Quincy, Fla.	Florida
10. Darius Winston	DB	24	West Helena, Ark.	Arkansas
11. Chris Davenport	DT	25	Mansfield, La.	LSU
12. Greg Reid	DB	27	Valdosta, Ga.	Florida State
13. Branden Smith	DB	28	Atlanta	Georgia
14. Nico Johnson	LB	32	Andalusia, Ala.	Alabama
15. Willie Downs	ATH	34	Tallahassee, Fla.	Florida State
16. Malliciah Goodman	DE	38	Florence, S.C.	Clemson
17. Aaron Murray	QB	46	Tampa	Georgia
18. Chris Faulk	OL	47	Slidell, La.	LSU
19. Patrick Patterson	WR	50	Macon, Miss.	Ole Miss
20. Marlon Brown	WR	53	Memphis	Georgia
21. Zeke Motta	LB	54	Vero Beach, Fla.	Notre Dame
22. Jaamal Berry	RB	56	Miami	Ohio State
23. Michael Ford	RB	59	Leesville, La.	LSU
24. Ryne Giddins	DE	61	Seffner, Fla.	South Florida
25. Orson Charles	TE	62	Tampa	Georgia



OT | D.J. FLUKER ALABAMA The 6' 7" 350-pound offensive tackle played for three different high schools in Alabama and Mississippi because of family issues, but the Tide's staff never lost track of him. Good thing, because Alabama's biggest need was at left tackle after Andre Smith left early for the NFL.



RIVALRIES SEC: THE LIFE

Compare those numbers with a state such as Wisconsin, which produced only 63 signees between 2004 and '09. If coach Bret Bielema's Badgers signed every BCS-quality recruit the state produced, they'd still have only a little more than half a team. "We'd love every player from our roster to be from the state of Wisconsin, to be quite honest," Bielema says. "But we can't fill up our scholarship numbers. There just aren't enough Division I football players to get us at that point."

That isn't a problem in the SEC, where the blue-chippers grow like kudzu. To fill their ranks, northern schools often attempt to raid SEC territory. Rutgers, for example, has bought billboards in Florida. But these coaches often face a challenge SEC coaches don't: persuading players accustomed to wearing flip-flops in November to come to a place that requires Gore-Tex boots. Programs such as Notre Dame, Michigan and Nebraska must overcome negative recruiting that focuses on the thermometer. When asked how many times coaches from Southern schools mentioned the cold in Lincoln, former Nebraska cornerback Armando Murillo laughs. "They said that all the time," says Murillo, who went to high school in Tampa and played at a junior college in Arizona.

Florida State's Fisher, who learned the tricks of Southern recruiting during stints at Auburn and in Baton Rouge, doesn't deny that he offers a chilly warning to skill-position players thinking of crossing the Mason-Dixon line. "I don't know if we ever said, 'You'll freeze.' But the landscape of playing, especially if you're a skill guy, is not as conducive as it is in the South," Fisher says. "The weather can prohibit you from using all your skills at times and prevent you from getting the numbers and recognition and things you want. I think it is a significant difference."

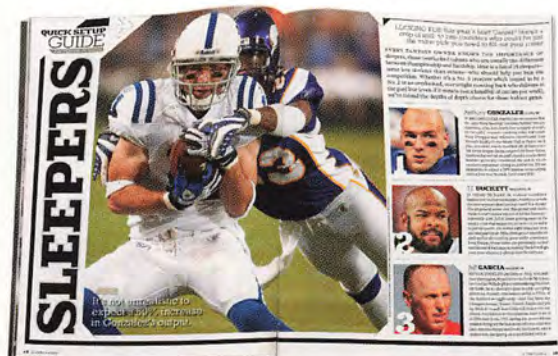
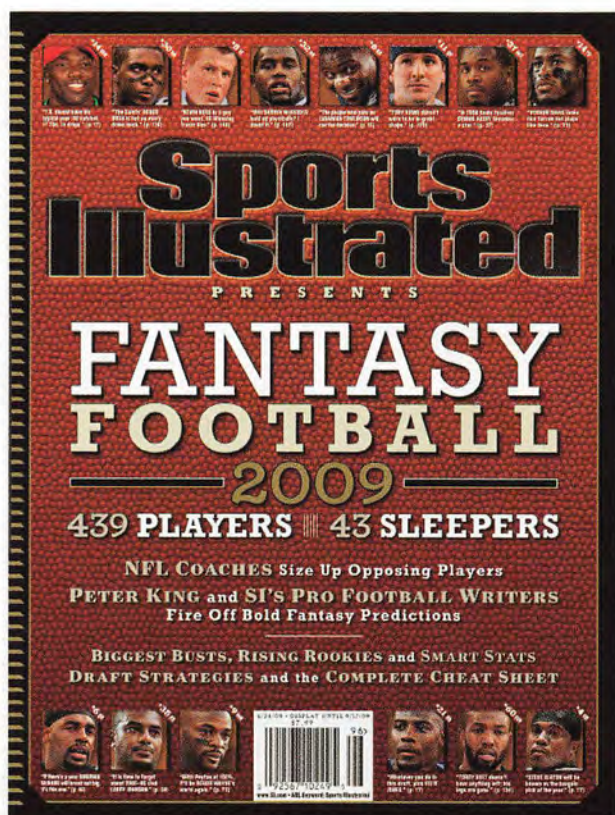
But geography is still the biggest difference. It's why Kiffin must work harder to return the Vols to the top of the conference and why Meyer, Georgia's Mark Richt and LSU's Les Miles can pluck homegrown recruits and enjoy the view. "A lot of people wonder why our staff is at Florida," Meyer says. "Five hours from our doorstep are the finest players in America." □

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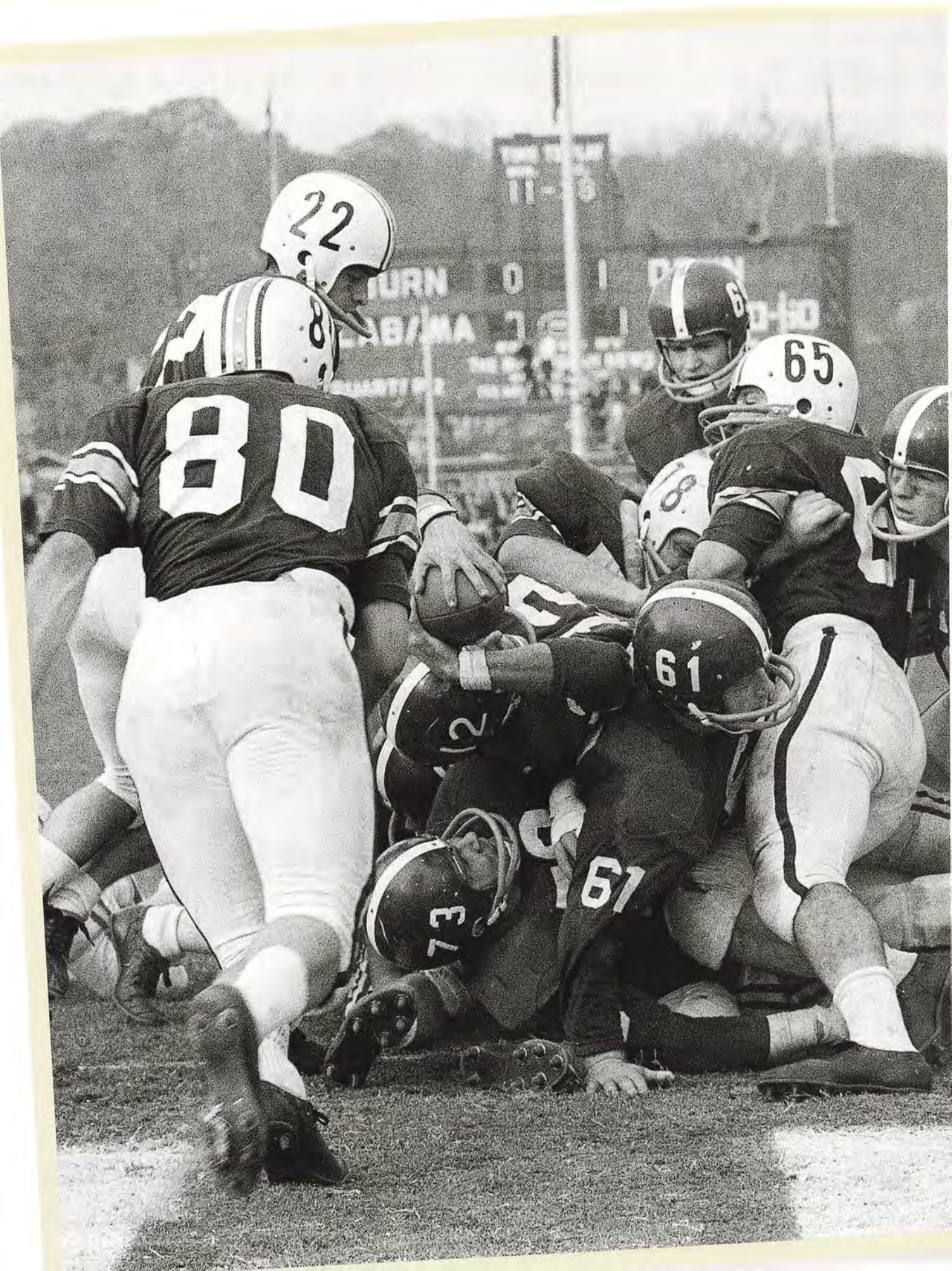
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RIVALRIES

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THE VERY BEST OF ENEMIES

Deep in the beating, often bleeding, heart of SEC football, winning isn't everything—winning against that certain someone is | BY FRANZ LIDZ

"Blood makes the grass grow! Blood makes the grass grow!"

—TENNESSEE LINEMAN SPENCER RILEY,
firing up the Volunteers defense during a 1999 game with Alabama

IF RIVALRIES ARE THE LIFEBLOOD OF football, the fields of the SEC run redder than the Battle of Chickamauga's. As you might expect in a nearly 77-year-old conference that features the Crimson Tide, blood feuds are long-standing and deeply cherished. Nothing stokes a rivalry like geography, and the SEC spans nine states and embraces 12 distinct cultures. And no two colleges treat their rivalry as a blood sport more than Mississippi and Mississippi State, which lie just 70 miles

apart and are locked in perpetual class warfare.

Partisans of these schools despised each other long before football came to the Delta. Born of a working-class boycott against the very aristocracy that Ole Miss embodies, State opened in 1880 as Mississippi A&M but quickly became known as People's College. It now boasts a larger percentage of African-Americans among its student body than any other school in the conference. Ole Miss, founded in 1848, is a bastion of the landed gentry that constantly battles against a racist image.

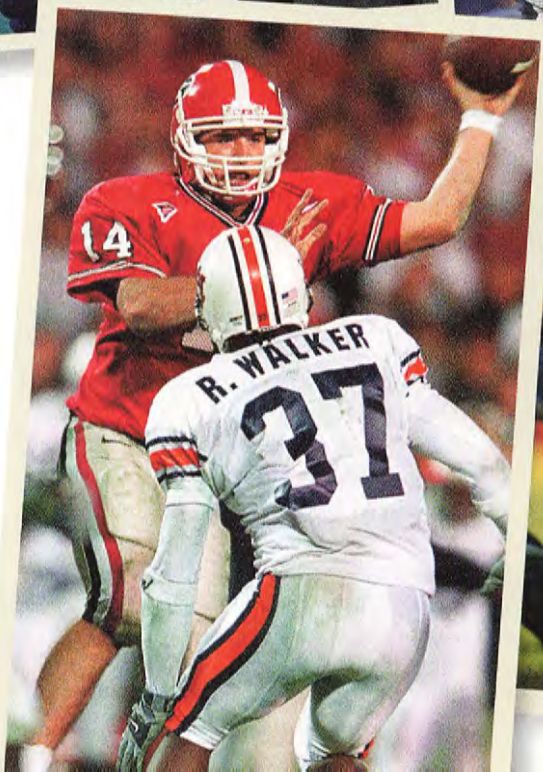
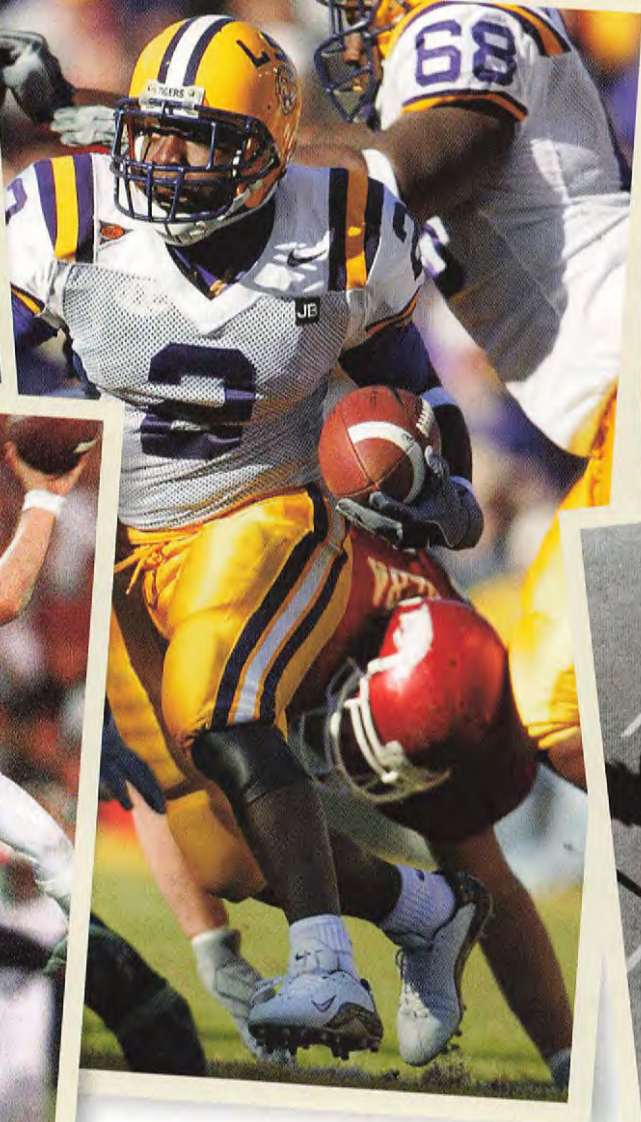
Though Ole Miss first fielded a team in 1893 and State in 1895, the colleges wouldn't agree to play until 1901. Even then, kickoff was delayed for 40 minutes while both sides disputed the eligibility of the opposing team's players. A&M drew first blood on the first touchdown in school history and prevailed 17-0, for its first-ever victory. Afterward A&M's student newspaper accused Ole Miss of "dirty play when the referee was not looking."

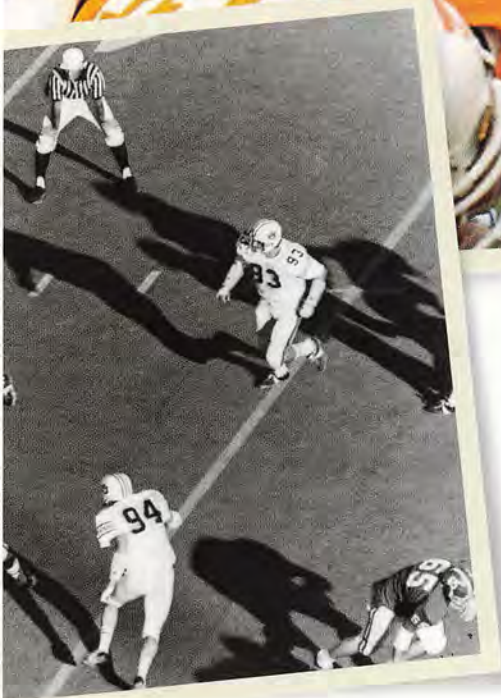
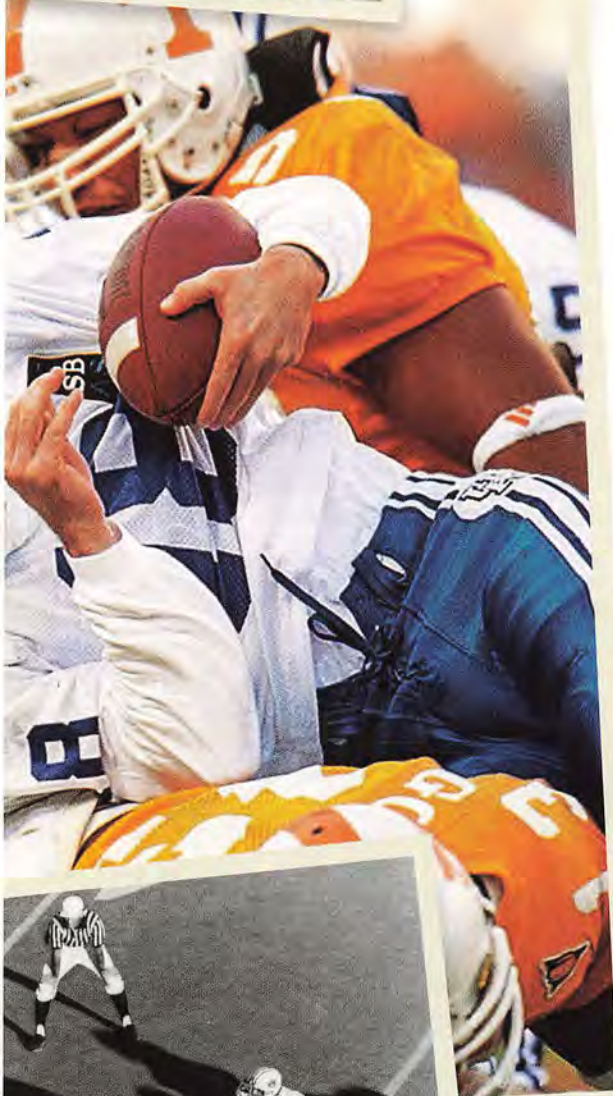
Dirty or not, the Rebels went on to lose the first 13 meetings, getting outscored 327-33. After winning 7-6 in 1926 in Starkville, their delirious fans rushed the field to tear down the goalposts. Bloodthirsty A&M partisans bolted from the stands brandishing cane-bottomed chairs, and Mississippi mayhem ensued. A&M's yearbook, *Reveille*, reported, "A few chairs had to be sacrificed over the heads of [the Mississippi fans] to persuade them that was entirely the wrong attitude."

There are few more glorious sights than when a school breaks a losing streak against its blood brother and the players joyously hoist that trophy in the air. SEC victory hardware takes the shape of everything from

Postcards from the Border Wars: The Tide rolled in the '61 Iron Bowl (far left), beating Auburn 34-0 to scotch any rolling of Toomer's Corner; Travis Henry's dive in '99 helped the Vols beat Kentucky for one of 24 straight; Georgia and Florida know how to draw the line.







food (Ole Miss–Mississippi State's Golden Egg) to footwear (LSU–Arkansas's Golden Boot, which at 175 pounds is the heaviest trophy in college football).

But the real bounty at stake is bragging rights. Sixty minutes of football gives the winning school license to crow for the next 364 days. "People talk about the Alabama–Auburn game on New Year's Day," says onetime Crimson Tide coach Gene Stallings. "They talk about it on Christmas Day. They talk about it on the Fourth of July." They're *still* talking about Stallings's predecessor, Bill Curry. In 1987 Curry's team lost to Auburn 10–0. In '88 his club won nine games but lost to Auburn 15–10. In '89 he took a 10–0 team that was ranked second in the country down to Auburn and lost 30–20. In '90—despite a record of 26–10, three bowl appearances and a conference title—he was coaching at Kentucky.

According to the Volunteers fan website gate21.net, rivalries are "what compels so many of us to travel great distances, expend huge sums of money, lose sleep, risk personal injury, get arrested for disorderly conduct. . . . It is a question of pride, of respect, of tradition, and (sometimes) insanity." SEC rivalries divide families, strain marriages, test lifelong friendships and inspire bloodless insults—many of which involve illumination.

How many college students does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

At South Carolina it takes 80,000. One to screw in the bulb and 79,999 to discuss how this will finally be the year

The 'Bama boys (upper left) looked like straight-A students after tying Auburn 6–6 in 1907; 63 years later Shug and the Bear led the rivals, while in '72 (lower right) it was "Punt, 'Bama, punt!" Of course, Auburn likes to get its licks in on Georgia, too (lower left), while LSU has welcomed Arkansas to the SEC with open arms, and Tennessee loves to get together with Kentucky every year.

that they have a decent football team.

At Vanderbilt it takes two. One to change the bulb and one to explain how they did it every bit as well as any Ivy League.

OF COURSE SOUTH CAROLINA'S BIG rival is Clemson, a college no longer in the same league, and Vanderbilt's is Tennessee, though the Volunteers' big rival is no longer the Commodores. Animosity between the schools was once so great that when Robert Neyland was hired in 1925, the new Tennessee coach was told that his only job requirement was to beat Vanderbilt. Of the 80 games played since, the Vols have won 68. Since Vanderbilt has never won an SEC title, some might argue that its biggest rival is itself.

On the other hand, Alabama has four venerated rivalries, including one with Tennessee that's called the Third Saturday in October (now held on the fourth Saturday in October), which is not to be confused with the Third Saturday in September, the handle hung on the Vols' annual showdown with Florida. Each confrontation is honored like the Sabbath.

Shortly after Curry became coach of Alabama, his wife, Carolyn, got a call from their Methodist minister in Atlanta. The minister asked her how the couple was faring. "Well," Carolyn said, "you know football is a religion down here."

"Oh, no," said the minister, "it's much more important than that."

At Alabama it takes five. One to change it, three to reminisce about how Bear Bryant would have done it and one to throw the old bulb at an NCAA investigator.

At Auburn it takes 100. One to screw in the bulb, 49 to talk about how they do it better than 'Bama and 50 to realize it's all a lie, get looped and roll Toomer's Corner.

YOU KNOW IT'S A REAL RIVALRY WHEN the two colleges despise each other so much that the game must be played on neutral ground. That's why from 1904 through '89 'Bama and Auburn played in Birmingham. The Tide and the Tigers first clashed in 1893 (Auburn won 32–22),

but the series was suspended after the 1907 game because of a disagreement over referees and expense money. Auburn's insistence on a "neutral" Northern ref and a \$3.50 per diem (Alabama offered \$3) led to a 41-year standoff that ended only when the respective presidents, at the insistence of the Alabama State Legislature, agreed to bury the hatchet—literally—during a Bury the Hatchet ceremony in Birmingham's Woodrow Wilson Park.

The Iron Bowl, named for the vast iron ore deposits in Alabama's hill country, was thus revived. When 'Bama won two

of the first three games after the series resumed, Auburn fired coach Earl Brown and hired alumnus Shug Jordan, whose teams would come to dominate the Iron Bowl until the Tide hired Bryant as coach in 1958. Bryant, whose teams crushed the Tigers for years, underscored the game's importance by saying he would "rather beat that cow college once than beat Texas 10 times."

Joe Namath, Ken Stabler and Shaun Alexander are all part of Iron Bowl lore, as is placekicker Van Tiffin, who made what became known as The Kick in 1985 by drilling a 52-yard field goal as time expired to give Alabama a 25-23 victory. But

the quintessential Iron Bowl game was 13 years earlier. Trailing 16-3 with 5:30 left, underdog Auburn blocked two Alabama punts—returning both for touchdowns—to win 17-16, handing the Tide its first loss of the year and ending its national-title

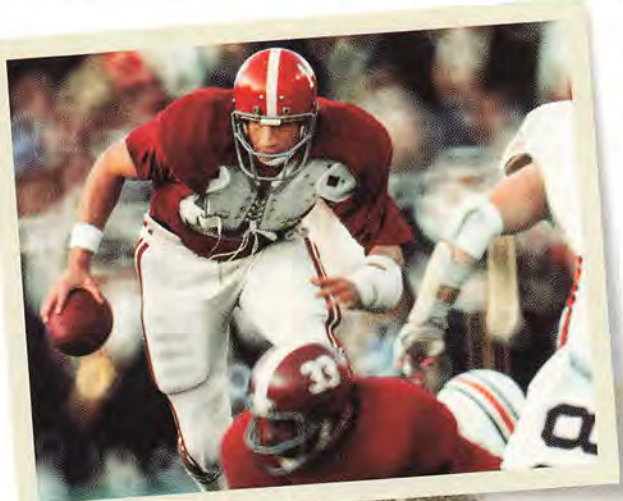
hopes. The game is remembered simply as "Punt, 'Bama, punt!" As always after a Tigers win, Auburn students converged at the intersection of College Street and Magnolia Avenue to roll the trees at Toomer's Corner with toilet paper.

At Ole Miss it takes six. One to change the bulb, two to mix the drinks and three to find the perfect J. Crew outfit to wear for the occasion.

At Mississippi State it takes 15. One to screw it in, two to buy the Skoal and 12 to yell, "GO TO HELL, OLE MISS, GO TO HELL!!!"

THE FIRST EGG BOWL BETWEEN Ole Miss and Mississippi State took place on Thanksgiving Day in 1927—the year after the chair-wielding Starkville Massacre. An Ole Miss honor society, Sigma Iota, proposed tempering the hostilities with the Golden Egg, a gold-plated football mounted on a pedestal. At a postgame ceremony the winner would be awarded

The first Alabama-Auburn game was played in Birmingham's Lakeview Baseball Park on Feb. 22, 1893 (below). The Tigers won 32-22. In '74 tattered QB Richard Todd led the Tide to a 17-13 victory.



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the trophy, not the goalposts. The idea was a success. Except for an on-field, pregame brawl in 1997, the Egg Bowl has been relatively free of free-for-alls.

No doubt the high point of this series came in 1983, the year of the Immaculate Deflection. Ole Miss led 24–23 in the closing seconds. The Bulldogs inched closer to the goal line, and a chip-shot field goal seemed inevitable. With 24 seconds remaining, State kicker Artie Cosby attempted a 27-yard field goal. But as true as it was between the uprights, the ball never got there: A gust of wind slapped it

down to give the Rebels their first winning season in eight years and a berth in the Independence Bowl. The Bulldogs were left with egg on their faces.

At Georgia it takes three. One to screw in the bulb and two to phone a friend at Georgia Tech for instructions.

At Florida it takes four. One to change it and three to figure out how to get high off the old one.

THE WORLD'S LARGEST OUTDOOR Cocktail Party is what Georgia's annual mixer with Florida was once called. In a nod to political correctness it's now officially the Florida-Georgia/Georgia-Florida Game. In the past fans from each college sat in alternating

sections of the stands, their contrasting school colors making Jacksonville Municipal Stadium look like a giant beach ball. The Bulldogs hold a 46–38–2 edge in the series, but the Gators have won 16 times since 1990. Georgia fans have a special animus toward former Florida coach Steve Spurrier, whose players regularly beat the Dawgs and who liked to run up the score. Spurrier showed no respect, once calling Ray Goff, Georgia's coach, Ray Goof.

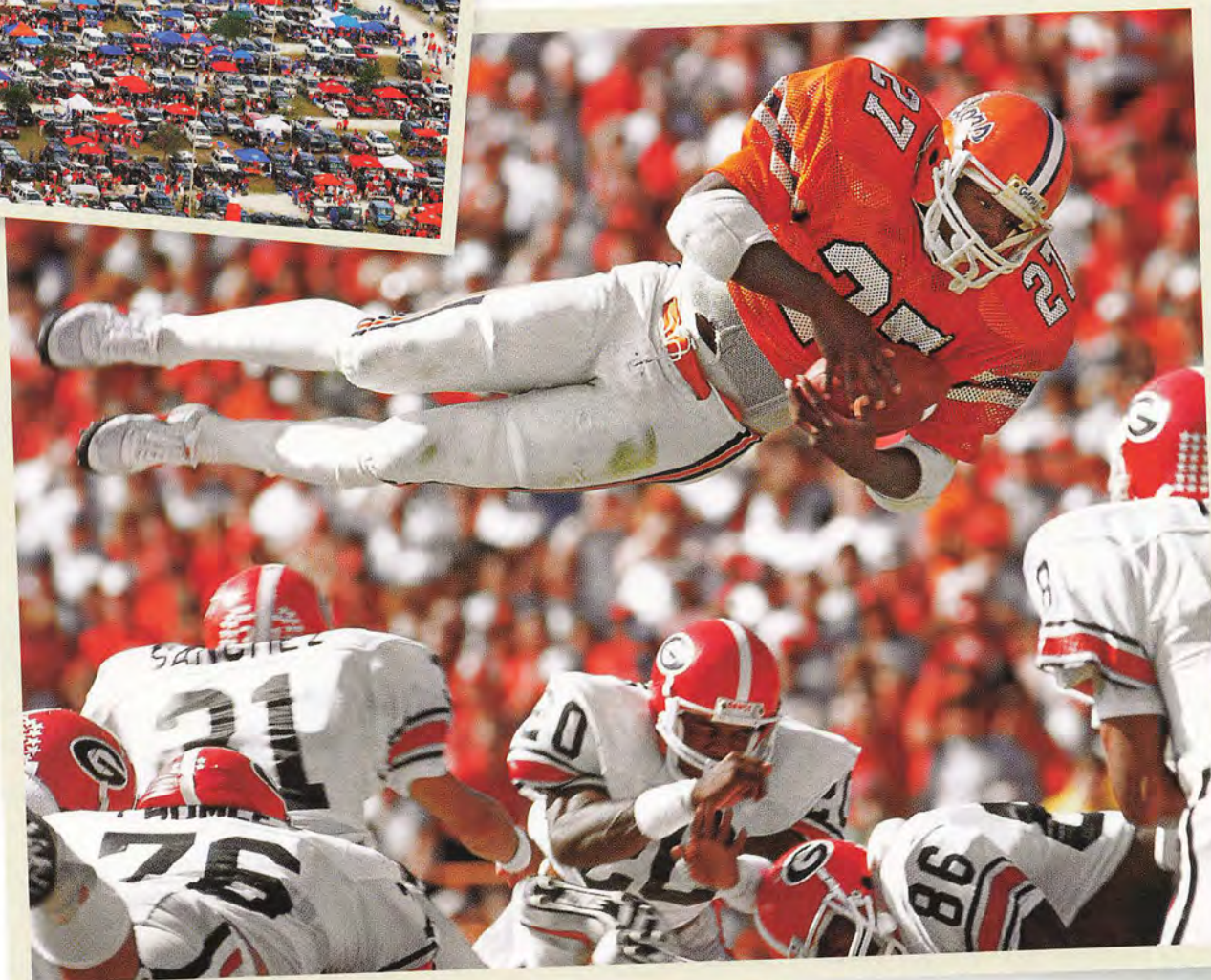
Of course, back in the 1970s and '80s the Bulldogs showed the Gators no respect, winning 15 of the 20 parties. The Florida faithful eased the pain by giving nicknames to the worst losses.

1975: Appleby to Washington

1976: Fourth and Dumb

1985: One Whole Week

It's the Florida-Georgia/Georgia-Florida Game now, *not* the World's Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party—which is what it was called back in '84, when the Gators' Neal Anderson got high in a 27–0 Florida win.



BILL FRANKS (TOP); JOHN IACONO



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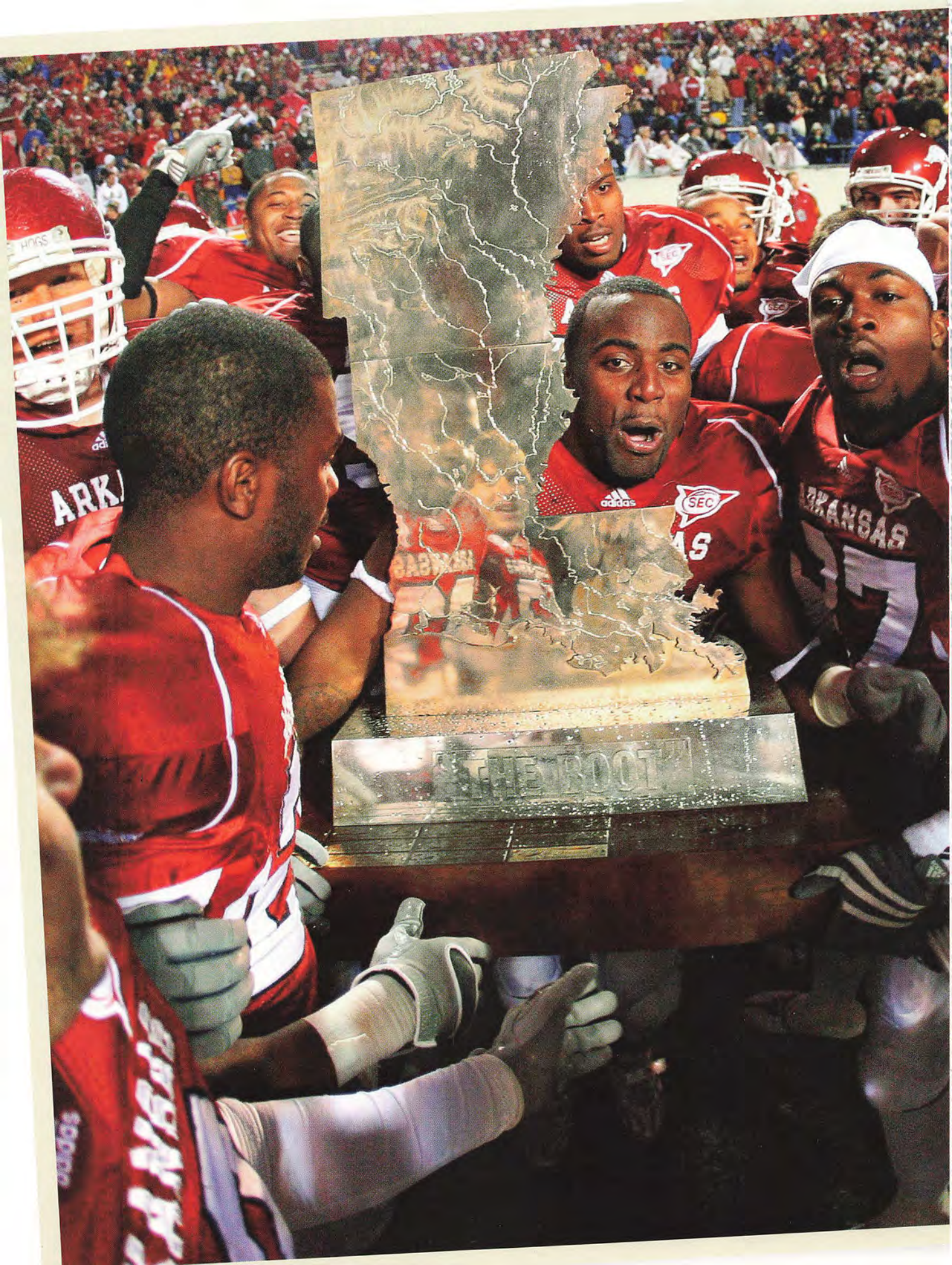
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ence titles and national championships. It was during the 1935 season that Tide senior tight end Bear Bryant played against the Vols on a broken leg. After World War II, Bryant coached for eight seasons at Tennessee's rival Kentucky, and the Wildcats made their first bowl appearance ('47) and won their first and last outright SEC title ('50). The only blot on Kentucky's escutcheon during that Sugar Bowl-winning campaign was a 7-0 loss to Tennessee in its final regular-season game. For all his heroics in Lexington, Bryant beat the Vols only once as the Wildcats' coach. Which may explain why as coach of Alabama he so loved beating Tennessee that

he'd hand out postgame victory cigars. Though the Vols later picked up the tradition, over the past 24 years they have fired up only 11 sets of Crimson cheroots while lighting up hapless Kentucky 24 times.

At LSU it takes seven—and each one gets credit for four semester hours.

At Arkansas it takes none. There is no electricity in Arkansas.

Worst of all was a 1980 face-off that lives in infamy as "Lindsay Scott!" The Gators were up by one with 90 seconds left; Georgia at its own seven. Third-and-11. Georgia QB Buck Belue, on the run, completed a pass to Scott at the Bulldogs' 25. Georgia broadcaster Larry Munson made the call: "Lindsay Scott! ... 35, 40! ... Lindsay Scott! ... 45, 50! ... 45, 40! ... Run, Lindsay! ... 25, 20! ... 15, 10, 5! ... Lindsay Scott! ... Lindsay Scott! ... Lindsay Scott!"

At Tennessee it takes 10. Two to figure out how to screw it in, two to buy an orange lampshade and six to phone a radio call-in show and talk about how much they hate Alabama.

At Kentucky it takes eight. One to screw it in and seven to discuss how much brighter it shines during basketball season.

THE VOLUNTEERS CONSIDER THE Crimson Tide to be their biggest rival, mostly because Alabama is the only SEC school to have won more games, confer-

Give 'em the Boot! In 2008 the Razorbacks beat archrival LSU and hoisted college football's heaviest trophy, while down in Oxford, despite Marcus Washington's Bulldog tackle of Ole Miss's Shay Hodge, the Golden Egg was laid in Rebel hands.

THE TIGERS AND THE RAZORBACKS have roared and whoo-pig-sooeyed at each other since 1901, but they didn't become *rivals* until 1992, when Arkansas joined the SEC. In '96 the gold-plated Boot was cobbled in the shape of the college's respective states. Just hoisting the trophy can be a hardship for the winner. Usually that has been LSU's responsibility, though in 2007 in Baton Rouge, Houston Nutt's Razorbacks pulled off the most memorable upset of the series, stunning the then No. 1 Tigers 50-48 in triple overtime. Three days later Nutt resigned as Arkansas's coach and was hired by Ole Miss, which had gone winless in the SEC for the first time since 1982. "You know the old metaphor," explained Rebels athletic director Pete Boone. "When you smell blood, you need to go and find out if you can get the job done."

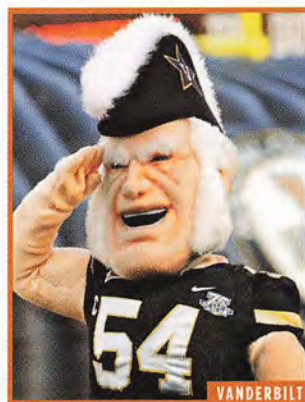
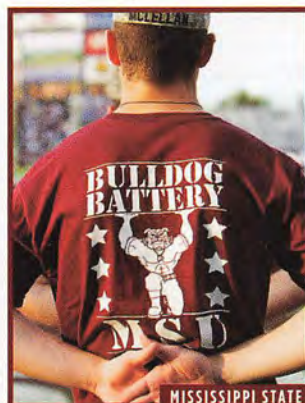
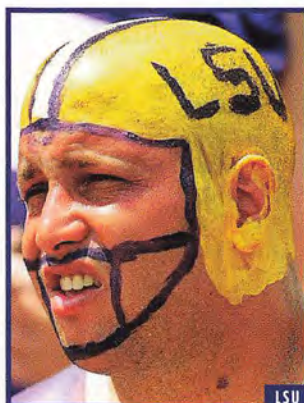
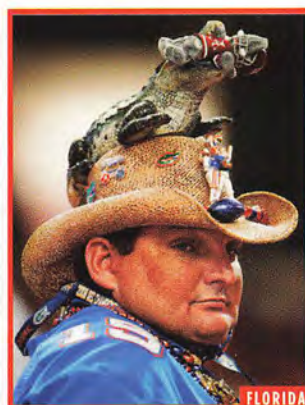
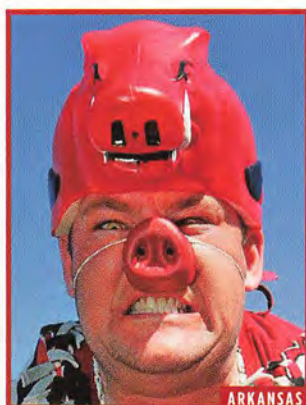
In the SEC, reasoning tends to be blood simple. □

FROM LEFT: NELSON CHENAI/UTUS PRESS/REX; MATTHEW SHARP/GETTY IMAGES (2)

SPECTRUM OF THE SEC

It's not difficult to tell where a fan's allegiance lies in the polychromatic world of SEC football

SATURDAYS IN THE SEC ARE AN EXPLOSION OF COLOR, FROM THE NUMEROUS live-animal mascots to the sorority sisters in houndstooth hats to the Razor-backs hollering in hog helmets. Whether these colors are permanent or just painted on for a day (or two) doesn't matter. Families have cheered for the same team for generations, and fans wear their emotions on their sleeves and every other conceivable body part. So, whose colors do *you* wear?



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